

Approach to Reality

A.J. Peterson





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SIGNALS FROM ETERNITY
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ROSEKING PUBLICATIONS

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Paper Back: ISBN 0 946402 00 0

Hard Back: ISBN 0 946402 01 9

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Cover: Jill Wood.

Printed in England by Redwood Burn Limited,
Trowbridge, Wiltshire.

Published by Rose•King Publications,
P. O. Box 13, Cambridge. CB4 1EZ. England.

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Many aspects of the requirements and effects of spiritual development are still little known in the West. This book attempts to describe the essential relationship between pupil and Teaching Master, also to outline some of the states experienced by a student of the Sufi Way.

Author's note.

The scripts referred to in the text are authentic, and await later publication.

A.J.P.

The author would like to record grateful thanks to Michael Mann for his valued advice and encouragement; also to Dr. Sylvia Darke for her generous assistance.



**To The Sayed Idries Shah
This book is dedicated**

**He who knows, and knows that *he is*:
he is wise.
Let him be followed.
By his presence alone man may be transformed.**

Sarmoun Recital.

Merciful and mighty Lord,
do not turn me from your door;
hold me captive, take away my sleep;
let me thirst for you alone:
do not give me mere water to drink.
Why should I search high and low for you?
This pain of mine is the very chart
that leads me to you, my destination.

It was nearly dark when I reached London — the chilly, blustery darkness of an early April evening. I was shivering, and swore with vexation as I parked the car. The previous day I'd got thoroughly chilled waiting around on a damp and windy building site, and today had repeated my folly yet deeper in the green and dripping Sussex countryside. Cautiously I had parked the car some distance down the unmade lane, well away from the sea of mud scheduled for a select convalescent home, and realised too late it was too far for the comfort of retreat without the risk of missing my client, who could so easily approach from the opposite side.

By the time she arrived I was cold to the bone, my coat damp and clammy. She apologised profusely, of course, but, middleaged and robust, appeared immune to the weather, and a further hour spent with markers, and the inevitable suggestions and recommendations, consolidated my wretchedness. It was with relief I concluded our arrangements, and made my way as swiftly as possible to the hotel, mercifully a good one — centrally situated and already known to me. At least when Dave expected us to work away, he always ensured *that* part was satisfactory; his sites were frequently in such God-forsaken places, but staying in comfort overnight en route had become almost a 'perk'. I leapt up the steps to the welcoming foyer, and thankfully booked myself in.

After a hot bath and a shave I felt better, and discovered I was hungry. Partaking of an excellent meal, I read a little — until feeling again my flu-like agues, I subsided shivering into bed.

Sleep was elusive, then fitful. Something troubled the back of my mind, but I couldn't place it. It was as if I had forgotten an important detail, and my mind threshed to and fro in its effort to remember it. Repeatedly I surfaced throughout the night, of itself nothing new, for I haven't slept properly for a long time anyway, and have been beset by vivid and fragmentary dreams, but now I felt inexorably there was a hidden reason for my disturbance, and got up thoroughly disgruntled and aggrieved.

The next morning I saw a London client whose contract was almost

completed and, finding him well satisfied, returned to the hotel for lunch before turning homeward. I was still chilly and beginning to snuffle, an ominous sign. My colds are legion and renowned for their staying power and sheer intensity of purpose. I dosed myself reluctantly with whisky, and hoped.

The dining room was well filled, and everyone was very voluble, even animated. I remembered vaguely having seen signs posted for a seminar, and concluded, correctly it transpired, that these people were attending it. My head by now was hazy and I was too miserable to raise much interest, yet I began to glance round and observe with a dulled curiosity what manner of people they were. I had assumed it was a business affair, but these persons belied it — they were mainly professional types, yet somehow even to my cold-fuddled brain they didn't exude statistics or sales-launch, nor the dreariness of directors or delegates. A woman gesticulated vividly at the nearest table, and mentioned a well-known writer, who had obviously given a talk on the East. A literary function perhaps? I read prodigiously myself and have travelled . . . I began to listen, idly at first, to odd snatches of conversation. There were, it seemed, four speakers, but the theme wasn't travel — some religious element entered, of a nature I couldn't discern. I felt mildly intrigued, then suddenly vexed, as a party occupied the intervening table and I could no longer hear. They were not from the seminar apparently, and occupied themselves solely with discussion of the menu.

My coffee was served, and my thoughts sank again to dread of a chill or 'flu at the very beginning of a work-packed new schedule. The enthusing woman was obscured from my view and my eyes drifted mechanically round the crowded room. A girl at the far table reminded me nostalgically of Sophie and my gloom increased. I had tried to keep all thoughts of her from my mind, but sometimes, as now, a memory was triggered, and they stole up on me with no loss of force or longing, though it was more than a year since she left me. I struggled briefly and fiercely with the raw emotions of aching loss and incipient anger, and looked quickly away.

The room was suddenly alien — I was the only person in its affluent confines completely alone. All round me was chatter, exuberance and the obvious signs of friendship and affection, but here in the closed circumference of my solitary repast, I felt the utter aloneness of the odd one in a crowd. This state I knew of old, and feared it. Abruptly I broke my train of thought and sought to shake myself out of it. And then I saw someone I knew — or at least I thought I did, and switched my mind to trying to place him.

He was a tall, lean man, with a noble head and an aquiline profile — dark, fiftyish, distinguished, and certainly not English. He was in deep

conversation with a woman and another man, but once he looked up, and, catching my eye upon him, smiled swiftly and returned to his talk. I was puzzled. Who on earth was he? Ought I to remember him? Was he a quite recent acquaintance, or a face from the distant past? My mind fumbled back through contacts and clients, to no avail, and floundered at last even through my days in Egypt. No, no, no! It was quite ridiculous. I knew I didn't know him. And yet — he was so familiar — some part of my memory could have sworn that I knew him well.

As I finished my coffee he stood up to leave, his companions also. Still talking they passed in front of me, and he nodded politely and briefly as they went by. Again came the resurgent sense of duality — I knew him intimately, and yet I did not know him at all. At length, putting it all down to the whisky and the muddled beginnings of migraine, I moved to the empty lounge, settled comfortably in the warmth of an armchair, and dozed for an hour. Feeling a little refreshed I decided to start on the longish drive home. It was drizzling but I made good headway, and by the time my eyes began streaming and my head to throb in earnest, I'd reached the refuge of my Norwich flat.

The flat was my current blessing. It was spacious and comfortable; part of a solid, Victorian mansion set in two acres of ground. I had been fortunate in finding it, and had moved in nearly a year ago, desperate to leave the cottage with all its memories. I looked with appreciation on its austere simplicity, as I always did on my return — here were my books, here was my music, the wellsprings of my life, and the saviours of my sanity. Sniffing and groaning I made myself hot drinks in a thermos, found aspirins and handkerchiefs, and gratefully submerged myself in blankets. Bed was the only place possible, and I yielded myself without argument to the inevitable.

For three days I remained there, frustrated and bad-tempered, while Dave cursed and rearranged my schedule. We had never been so busy, and I knew he was feeling decidedly peeved. My indispositions were too frequent, too severe, and too inconvenient. I struggled back in harness feeling utterly dejected. Years ago there had been a certain sympathy for the weaknesses left from my disastrous Cairo assignment — after all, his father had sent me there for the Company's benefit; but the old man was dead now, and it was all forgotten, and younger men were eager to fill the gaps I was periodically obliged to leave. I realised uneasily that Dave's patience was running short. I was forty-one — not the best age for a man in a pressurised job with a constitution like mine. I ought really to be at the height of my vigour — not behaving like a cosseted female each time the elements proved unduly inclement. I suspected I would soon have to face up to changes, but kept putting the thought aside. I liked my job — it

had movement and interest. It required my attention and wholehearted endeavour, which was good. I could lose myself in work and forget my broken marriage, and the bitter fact that Sophie was not mine anymore.

But the atmosphere was bleak in Dave's office, and though he was pleasant and advised me kindly enough to stay off-site a few days, I would have preferred his customary bluster. With misgivings I settled in my own sanctum and leafed through a pile of specifications. We were inundated with work, and Luke, my assistant, could well have handled most of the data littering my desk. Right now I should be in Exeter, and I visualised the hub of activity already set in motion by months of preliminaries. A wave of exasperation caught up with me, coupled with a stinging resentment. My legs were like cottonwool and I knew I was out of bed too soon. My chest felt raw, and my left ear drummed catarrhally. Aggrieved and ashamed, I stared unhappily at the window.

How different it all was now. The large modern block, the company cars, the unwieldy staff. In the old man's day we had used a converted stables, and everything was slower paced, more compact and friendly. Dave was his only son, and when we had joined him, both fresh from University, eager and enthusiastic, the first overseas contracts were coming in, and elation ran high. Dave and I had worked like beavers, and it had really paid off financially.

It had been so easy for the old man, already a first class engineer of repute. In went the tenders, and out came the contracts, often to his own surprise. An office block, a bridge, a school — small stuff considering what he could have done. But he was cautious and frugal, and the money poured in, and more and more contracts . . . I looked up as Wilson passed the door, head high and looking jubilant. Dave had sent him off to Exeter in my stead. I cursed under my breath, but without vehemence. My angers were soon dissipated, I had fought them through before, too many times. There was nothing I could do to alter things, and I was inwardly resigned.

I went out to the main office to show a good face. Hilliard was there, a man I couldn't stand, and I wished I had stayed put. He was a good surveyor, but abnormally opinionated and supremely insensitive — we had already crossed swords several times, and I was in no frame of mind today for his ill-concealed jibes. Sachs, the senior draughtsman, immersed in blueprints, looked up and acknowledged me. He was senior in years to all of us, and I liked him more than the rest, except Dave. A small man, Sachs, perpetually worried — balding, with spectacles usually perched on his forehead. Another casualty from the tropics, in the days of the old man's frugality — Sachs hadn't always been office-bound.

The others ignored me, too full of their own affairs. Bryce-Jones was in

for a mornings paperwork, and as usual ogling some salacious magazine before getting on with it, with Wisbey hovering nervously, not wishing Sachs's eagle eye to notice his quick, surreptitious glances. Whiting was making calculations, and Dixon was on the telephone. I moved off. Sachs raised his voice and said sharply to Wisbey, "It's chaps like *you* that put the fear of the devil in chaps like *me*." There was an undertone of feeling that boded no good for a junior. Sachs's daughters were twelve and fifteen and a constant worry that played on his mind. I got out of earshot but sympathised silently. If I had a daughter I would doubtless feel the same. I wandered through the annex off reception, avoiding the typists, and peered into the offices of colleagues, but no-one else was about, they were all out on sites scattered over the country. I wished I was too.

I stuck doggedly at my desk all day and the day following, while rain fell more or less steadily outside the whole time. As I left for home on the second day, I noticed a brightening in the atmosphere, and feeling suddenly better, began to surface the mists of depression and look around again.

It was still cold, but spring was in the air, and as I walked through the old country garden on my way from the garages to my flat, I registered with appreciation the burgeoning trees and the scent of hyacinths. The flat was very quiet, and rather stuffy. I drew back the curtains, and opened all the windows, listening to bird-song and the myriad of sounds involved with nature and an imminent change in the weather. The views were superb. I felt rather surprised, and moved in a kind of wonder from window to window. Last year I'd been too miserable to be appreciative, and I noted in numbed amazement my own awareness, which, despite all things, registered acutely the beauty spread before it. My mood lifted, and all at once the days displeasures fell away from me, and I felt again the heady anticipation of years long gone.

Eating my solitary meal I pondered on this strange phenomenon, groping mentally for the springboard, the originating impetus. Introspective by nature, it was customary for me to trace my own trends of thought, and to try to find the roots of mood changes, though for so long now I had ploughed through a wilderness, and the ground of my attempted observations had lain fallow. And the wilderness was still there, thorny and sore, and hedged in with briars — yet with a rare flash of insight, I perceived momentarily another area of my inner psychology, a large expanse of hitherto uncharted territory — a place of expectancy and light.

I felt an incredulity — a sharp astonishment. For a brief instant it was so clear, so translucent. It linked me instantaneously with my lost boyhood, and all the aims and aspirations of sensitive youth. There was a long pause, a stillness, rapt and intangible; and when it released me, I had the

curious and uncanny sensation that for a moment I had moved outside myself, and peered within at the mechanism used by that self in all its phases, observing it with a detached, objective mode of analysis, and making simultaneously what I could only translate as a summing up of my life situation, and a comprehensive assessment of my entire psychology. It passed then, the awareness gradually slipping away from me, leaving me with an aftermath of peace.

Tentatively I probed in my mind through a screen of depression, heart-ache and loss — seeking as a matter of habit to rationalise the vivid impact of an experience that lay beyond its range, and my capacity to grasp. It had been a living, yet timeless actuality — and left an impressioned memory that carried its own hallmark of validity, and was quite unassailable.

I remained quietly at home that evening, immersed in thought, not understanding what had happened to me; but it contained a restorative balm, and I absorbed it into the deepest recesses of my humdrum everyday self.

During the night I awoke, very suddenly — my mind incredibly lucid. I knew I had dreamed, and as I lay registering this, the dream swam into my mind, fresh and complete, as if it had dropped there from above into a clear crystal pool. With a sense of shock I saw again the face of the man in the dining room; in the dream he had come up behind me as I sat at my desk, smiled meaningfully, and placed in front of me a pile of manuscript. It looked like the draft of a book, and in the bottom corner of the uppermost page I had seen my own name, Alexander Peterson, as if I had written it. The memory stupefied me, yet it filled me with warmth though I did not know why. I knew also with a strange certitude that I had dreamt this before, and that the memory lay in the back of my mind and had troubled me, unrecalled on the surface. The impression faded, like a light dimming behind a screen. I started to sneeze, then to cough, and as drowsiness again overcame me, I thought maybe I had imagined it all, and fell asleep.

I awoke to find sunshine spilling in through the curtains, and a definite change in the atmosphere, and in myself. The mystical effects of last evening and the night had all disappeared, but I felt well again, and more wholly myself than for many months. For a few minutes I lay sifting carefully all that I remembered, unsure how much of it was fantasy. Whatever reality I had glimpsed must of necessity have passed through the alembic of the brain — and the image making faculty of my mind, with all its personal quirks of conditioning and association, could easily have distorted it. It was most unlikely that I should ever see again the man of whom I had dreamed, and I realised I had probably projected his face through observing it closely, and mentally recording it, when sickening for a fever.

The feeling of renewed wellbeing persisted, however, and I entered my office in a vastly different frame of mind than when I had left it. Mid-morning I accosted Dave in his lair, requesting I go straight away to Exeter. He looked amazed, then beamed at me as in the old days, ran his fingers through his hair in a characteristic gesture, and indicated I pull up a chair. Our discussion was amiable. An hour later I was on the road to Devon, and my life picked up its threads again and reknitted them.

In May I was again in Sussex, and after a late appointment, stayed overnight once more at the same London hotel. The weather was warm now, and girls flitted to and fro in the late evening like moths in their summery dresses. There was an air of subdued gaiety in the foyer and the dining-room, and I learned there had been a wedding reception earlier of the old-fashioned kind, much to the delight of the overseas visitors. It was all convivial and evanescent, yet curiously unlike the atmosphere of my former visit.

It occurred to me suddenly, as a matter of interest, to ask about the seminar — its nature and so forth. The waiter remembered it, but was not very helpful; it was something to do with culture, he believed, and was sorry not to have taken more notice. I tried the barman, but he was equally vague — “It was arranged by some Institute”, he commented, then had to turn aside to serve someone else.

I had not forgotten the man of my dream, in fact, I ruminated quite often on the oddity of the whole thing, but by now the impact had faded, and I was quite convinced I had transposed one identity with another. The essential origin of that identity, however, was a different matter, and I believed with peculiar insistence, it was of the utmost importance to me.

I had read and studied sufficiently in the past to confirm my own knowledge of the comparative rarity and genuineness of my preceding experience, which lent an increased significance I thought, to the dream so closely following. I wished there was someone with whom I could discuss it, or at least things of a similar nature, but the friendships of my youth, wherein lay the only possibilities, had all lapsed during the early years of my marriage. Sophie had absorbed all my interests, and led me gently but firmly into the kind of life she wanted. I had been quite eclipsed, as I recognised now.

Memories flooded painfully and unexpectedly through my defences, and I clamped down on them hard, but too late. I felt the old anguish in all its fullness rise up in my entrails, and my wellbeing upturned, and grief and bitterness inflowed. Desperately I sought to overcome it, and the depression that inevitably followed. It was like the return of a torture from which I had been released for four precious weeks, and it took me unawares. Simultaneously I experienced an amazement that I could have

so completely forgotten the agony of emotion in which I had lived.

I had not intended to pursue further the subject of the seminar, feeling it coincidental in my own affairs and of little consequence, but, fiercely suppressing all thoughts of Sophie, to occupy my mind I again took it up, and waylaid the assistant Manager who happened to be in my vicinity, feeling at the same time rather foolish at my own persistence. "Ah, yes," he said encouragingly, "the seminar arranged by the Institute for Cultural Research — they have a place in Kent, you know. Their Director of Studies is Idries Shah, the writer, a very eminent man . . ." A lady anxious to make some enquiry approached at this point, and he was obliged to move away and attend to her, so I was little the wiser, but my purpose had been served. My errant emotions subsided, and my neighbour engaged me in pleasant conversation on the subject of culture until I left for bed.

Then a strange thing occurred, one of those odd quirks of chance or synchronicity that so fascinated Jung. On my next visit to London, a fortnight later, I went into Foyle's, where I had often browsed happily in the past. I had left it rather late, and the shop was almost on the point of closing, so I asked the assistant if he could recommend a good travel book. He rummaged about a bit, then handed me one in a bright orange cover. "How about this," he said, "I haven't read it myself, but it looks rather interesting." The jacket design was Middle Eastern, tasteful, and somehow austere. Leafing the pages, I glimpsed the word 'Mecca' and bought it without further ado.

As it happened I was too involved with clients to find time to do it justice until I arrived home again, but after a busy Monday I relaxed in the quiet solitude of the flat, and picked up the book with pleasurable anticipation. It was called 'Among the Dervishes' by O.M. Burke, and described a kind of pilgrimage he had made, which led him into contact with various Sufis. I had heard of Sufis before, of course, having read everything available on Gurdjieff, and even earlier had made sorties into Moslem literature in my days in the East. I knew that they were more than a mere sect, or offshoot of the Islamic faith, and Burke's book proved a coherent elaboration of this theme. Here also was something profound, *captured* yet elusive, in the pages. I had not perceived its substance previously in quite the same way, and my senses quickened even as I read. Moreover, after several chapters I discovered, with a stunned disbelief, that the central character was the very man who ran the aforementioned Institute, Idries Shah.

This man was born an Afghan prince, and is known and acknowledged as the hereditary leader of the Sufis. He is also attributed with unusual powers to say the least, and my mind somersaulted alarmingly at such a confrontation in an obviously serious book.

I paused and thought it over carefully. A great deal of scientific research into the paranormal is done these days, and I was reasonably familiar with it all — yet the statements made by Burke far outstripped the tentative formulations of men of science. I am not a sceptic, but neither, I trust, am I unduly gullible. My own mother was psychic, and saw and knew things outside the common ken. I had experienced certain things myself, including the odd hunch and even a definite premonition. I knew that sometimes the future had been foreshadowed to me in dreams — I had seen Sophie, for instance, and knew I would marry her. I had also seen, and ignored, the sequence of events that led to her leaving me for my best friend. But much could be the result of conjecture, a kind of mental telepathy, or psychic ingestion of the thoughts and emanations of others, enabling one to know their desires and intentions in advance. This could likewise apply to desires as yet unformulated, but already existent and in unconscious process of cohesion. There need be nothing fundamentally of a mystical nature about it.

I thought of the psychic or so called spiritual types I had already encountered; not many it is true, but some I had talked with during a brief investigation into spiritualism on my return from abroad. In general they were unimpressive, and largely worked on a hit or miss basis, or so it appeared to me. My own mother was without doubt the most accurate, the most sensitive, and the most intelligent intuitive known to me.

Personally I had cursed often the genetic inheritance of ultra-sensitivity she had passed on to me. My acute awareness of nature, and beauty in all its forms, was heavily counterbalanced by a consciousness of suffering unregistered by those with whom I was obliged to live and work. In particular, human betrayal of the helpless trust and highly developed capacities of animals was agony to me, and extended in an intensity of feeling to birds, insects and plants. All my life I had batted it down as best I could, and was even ashamed of it. It was a burden too painful to live with, and regarded as 'cissy' by the more extrovertly masculine, and worse still by their female counterparts. Coupled with my bodily ailments, despite my well-formed physique, it caused me to feel increasingly unmanly, and usually I tried to shrug it off, at least in the presence of others. On my own it was useless to pretend. Each time it encompassed me I found a fresh gethsemane.

My recent experience contained an element of a different order, though I dimly grasped it was connected in some way with this innate capacity to suffer, as if the ability to observe the inner intricacies of one's own psychology and processes of thought were an extension of that same sensitivity, transposed to another mode. And though it linked too, with all the lesser isms and manifestations of psychism and occultism, I knew it

belonged to neither, and was outside and transcendental to them all.

I turned again to the book, and read on, weighing every word. I did not know what to make of it, nor dared to believe its inherent and largely concealed premise. This man must have known such a book was written about him, and had let it pass. He was an eminent man, a professor, writer, lecturer, of impeccable scholarship — and after all, there was the law of libel if these statements offended him. I looked at the name of the publishers, Octagon Press — they were quite new to me. In all my book-worm years it was the first time I had heard of them.

The book presented to me a giant conundrum, a paradox, that a man of such standing should permit this. In the world of scholarship and science in which he moved, it could draw forth scepticism at best, and work to his detriment. He was bound to repudiate it. Unless — incredible thought, it was true.

Despite my bewilderment, I could not put the book down, and read well into the night until I finished it. One paragraph I studied over and over again - it seared itself into my brain, and though I did not fully understand it, moved me profoundly. It held for me the same essence as the timeless moment recognised already as the most significant experience of my life. I quote it here:

‘In the first place the consciousness of the Sufi ‘work’ resides within the whole community. This means that the Sufis are to be looked upon as one whole: a community of people who act as a sort of electrical battery which accumulates and discharges a certain sort of energy essential for human progress. This progress, however, is evolutionary: it leads towards the growth of a higher form of man. All other human enterprises are less important; sometimes these other enterprises . . . have to be attenuated because they are producing a force hostile to real human growth.’

‘This must surely mean, I objected, that there is a form of super-human being, a product, already in being?’

‘Wahid gravely assured me that this was true. This being, known by many other names in other cults, was that which was really directing the development of man.’*

When at last I slept, I dreamed I was looking for the man they talked of. I searched and searched, and just as I found him, awoke. But my over-tired brain had played a trick on me in the same way as before. I had seen again, a second before I surfaced, the austere face of the stranger in the dining room.

*O.M. Burke: *Among the Dervishes*, Octagon Press 1973, pp.164/165.

It was in June that I began to think of my holiday leave, and what I should do with it. I regarded it as a big step forward in my process of rehabilitation that I should contemplate sanely such a prospect, which would have been quite impossible for me earlier on. I decided at length on Scotland, and made several enquiries, which consolidated my decision and even created a mild degree of enthusiasm. An old school friend had settled in Inverness, and we exchanged letters — it reawakened that strata of myself which life with Sophie had entirely subjugated.

In this more reasoned frame of mind I drove to Exeter for several days, taking Luke with me, as I thought it would make a welcome change for him from the routine of the office, and direct experience of site-work would have its own value. Luke was a lively young fellow with a strong sense of humour, and I found myself laughing heartily for the first time in months. The job was going extremely well for a change, and there were no insoluble problems — we were putting up a small and very expensive estate of large and individually designed neo-Georgian dwellings, not Dave's usual cup of tea, but a very profitable one, and the pretty, timbered site hummed with activity and a voluble but impressively energetic teamwork.

The sun shone brilliantly and the skies were clear azure, when, mid-morning of the third day, we turned reluctantly homewards, still exhilarated by the satisfying events of our stay. To round off Luke's professional foretaste, on reaching Norwich we booked dinner in an excellent hotel, and, still joking, sat down early to eat. I hadn't felt so good for ages, totally relaxed, and free of the tensions I'd been heir to for so long. It was a little later that I saw Kennard, and for a brief, unguarded moment I didn't register our last meeting and felt simply pleased to see him again; and then almost simultaneously I remembered, and it all rushed back in a dazed unleashing of emotion. He saw me at the same moment, flushed, hesitated, then obviously decided to take the bull by the horns and came over.

"Alex?" — he spoke uncertainly, with all our years of friendship strangely null and void between us. I swallowed hard. My thoughts were suddenly in turmoil, and I struggled to conceal from Luke, indeed from both of them, the complexity of conflicting impulses seething for expression.

I took a deep and silent breath, and said, "Hello Max, how are you?" And he replied "Fine", and sat down rather weakly at our table as if his legs, like mine, had reduced themselves to jelly. "You are the last person I expected to see," I said bleakly — "I thought you were in Wales."

"I should be," he answered, "but I was called home through my father's illness — he had a sudden heart attack, but mercifully it seems he'll pull through. Surely you knew?"

I did not know. I had avoided all contact with past mutual friends and acquaintances. I heard myself utter regrets with sincerity, then came the overtones of polite conversation — but the unspoken question hovered in the air, and within minutes I could not restrain my tongue from uttering it. "How's Sophie?" and the relieved reply, "She's very well." Max paused, then flushed again. "I suppose you know we have a baby?"

It exploded on me like a bombshell, and required all my strength and concentrative power to control the shaking that commenced somewhere around my solar plexus. I managed to say "No, I didn't, as a matter of fact," and saw Luke staring anxiously at me, knowing I must look as ashen as I felt. I swallowed again, unable to say more, and praying fervently he would go now, but he lingered, observing me with apprehension and concern. At last I said, "What is it?" to lessen the strain and project an image of hard-forged nonchalance. It succeeded, for both relaxed visibly and he replied, "A boy. We call him Daniel." Her father's name, I thought, and the pain rolled over my heart.

Max looked from Luke to myself, wondering, I knew, if Luke was aware of our connections, and the extent of our past intimacy. I didn't enlighten him; for the moment I could not trust myself to speak. When with me, Sophie had not wished for maternity. At first I hadn't minded, and she had been very young, twelve years my junior — but in our latter years together I had minded increasingly, and I wondered briefly and hurtfully if this had been an accidental or deliberate act on her part.

Max had now risen, and was obviously taking his leave, exchanging a few words with Luke, and then with myself — casual, non-committal words that one bandies with umpteen acquaintance. I saw the hesitant anxiety in his eyes, almost a plea — a recollected nostalgia, I knew, for the old happy friendship we had shared for years. I did the best I could, and he seemed satisfied. As he moved away the tight knot in my stomach subsided, and the tension dissolved slowly — I saw from the corner of my eye he made straight for the door, and off, to my immense relief. I could not hate Max, nor wish to punish him, but I knew there could never be friendship between us again. I smiled wanly at Luke, who had probably linked things up in his mind. "Please, I don't want to talk about it," I said, "but I'm perfectly alright", and we began to talk shop as before, from the point we'd left off.

In the back of my mind, in its secret place, I thought of the strange experience that had come to me, and held onto its memory as to a lifeline.

The tension both triggered and released within me demanded its due, however, and afflicted me severely with migraine as of old. It was a sharp bout, but somewhat shorter than usual, and when it wore off I worked in the garden, finding contact with earth and grass profoundly restorative.

I had found long ago there was a healing force in nature, and realised with surprise that I had largely forgotten this, along with so much else through the years. Sitting outside in the June dusk amid the twittering of birds and the drifting scents of roses and honeysuckle, I drew deeply on the pristine peace that seemed to me to well up from the soil, and in some subtle fashion to distil itself from trees and plants — and even from the throb of full-throated song that resounded from bird to bird — until the stars appeared like dim lamps overhead.

In July, Dave took on a substantial contract in the Lebanon, which, as was usual, he offered first to me. I wasn't really up to taking it, apart from not wanting to, and for once he didn't argue but promptly sent young Matthew instead. Matthew was the most promising chap we'd had in years, and I knew both he and Dave were itching to see how he shaped. With relief I took over Matt's unfinished project, a superb period conversion in Cambridge, and hoped Dave was unaware of the extent of my unwillingness to go abroad again.

I knew Cambridge fairly well, and had always considered it an attractive city. As I drove there the following week, I thought with pleasure of its many bookshops, and resolved mentally to make the fullest use of them on my pending visits. Matt's conversion was a rambling old place now thoroughly updated, and skilfully transformed into suites of offices. It was very well done, preserving the best of the ancient, and blending it harmoniously with the modern. The head-aching part was now finished; the rest looked straightforward, requiring, on my part, mainly a watchful supervision. I checked out various points with Duff, Matt's youthful assistant, and saw at once that the work was in capable hands.

He was pleasant and good-humoured, but rather quiet and introverted. I hadn't worked with him before, and now commended him on his excellent foremanship. He was pleased, and smiled rather shyly, making some cryptic comment on the coordination of the hemispheres of the brain, and looking sheepishly at me to see if I recognised this as a joke. I laughed, more at the expression on his face than anything else, but it was so unusual to get this type of remark from an engineer that I caught him up on it, and asked where he got his ideas from. He grinned and said he should have known better than to make quotes at me of all people, and moved over to his car, where he pulled out a paperback book from a doorpocket. It was Ornstein's 'Psychology of Consciousness'.

"Do you know it?" he asked. I said no, but I'd make a mental note to get a copy.

"Have this," he said — "I've read it twice recently. It was on my College curriculum — you can return it when you've finished it." Then he went back to our former business, and closed up like a clam on all else. I was

amused. He was very young, very earnest, and already well-engrained with the dourness of the Yorkshireman born and bred.

I forgot the book until late evening, when I went out of the flat in a sudden curiosity to fetch it from my car. It was cool outside, but the air was clear with the promise of a fine day on the morrow. With an unmerited sense of wellbeing, I walked slowly back through the fragrant old rose arches that overhung the lavender bordered path, inhaling the summer scents with unbidden awareness, and returning to my tranquil sitting-room with a pleasant expectancy. I started to read, and immediately was seized with increasing discomfort. It wasn't physical, but originated somewhere in my mind, as if I had been caught, and pinned, and was struggling to be free.

The feeling was uncanny as I registered that this book, too, had Sufi connotations. Each chapter commenced with a linedrawn illustration of a quoted tale by Idries Shah, from one of his earlier works — used by the author, Robert Ornstein, to give other-dimensional insight to his researches. The whole thing was rather unnerving, though obviously, as I told myself firmly, a chance coincidence. Yet the book held my attention, and I sat up reading once again for half the night.

"All coincidence!" I said to my tired looking face as I shaved the next morning — "It's time, my lad, you took this superstitious trait of yours in hand!" I gesticulated forcefully with a hairbrush at my reflection, told myself not to be bloody childish, and got in late for work.

Dave was already on the rampage. Hurst, one of the junior draughtsmen, had slipped up on a copy lay-out that had inadvertantly been despatched, and there was all hell to pay. One of us should have noticed it of course, and I had the uneasy feeling it was me. Sachs was looking uncomfortable, Dixon stubborn, Wisbey scared stiff. Whiting walked around in offended agitation, and the unfortunate Hurst chewed his lips. None of them looked at me except Dave, and I guessed what they would all be thinking. Anything of a general nature, as yet unallocated and in its preliminary stages, invariably came my way for inspection before being contracted out. This was not strictly speaking my job, but an overlap from former years which I usually enjoyed, and had retained largely from interest and choice. The others were naturally accustomed to this and left me to it.

I apologised to Dave, who cooled down rather ungraciously, but only just. Fortunately the blunder had been found before much harm was done, but I realised afterwards what Dave undoubtedly knew then, that I'd handled the specifications during my last severe migraine, two weeks ago, and the error was mine — Hurst had merely copied it.

It was the first time my judgement on paper had been impaired by my

ailments, and it made Dave uneasy — I could understand why. After all, it was almost eighteen months since I last saw Sophie, but my physiological reactions hadn't lessened; rather, I suspected, had they increased in both strength and duration.

In silence I reviewed my situation that evening at home alone, staring dejectedly into the empty grate. What had life to offer me now, with all I had worked and struggled for gone? Ten years we had been together. Ten years of love and devotion, heartache and hope. I could not put it behind me as if it had never been; it was a good slice of anyone's life. Nor could I lightly seek another woman, as well-intentioned colleagues thought I ought. It was the woman I remembered that I wanted, the elegant, elusive woman I had loved — still loved it seemed. I knew that only time could heal the emotional wound, and until it healed, I could not think of other relationships.

My mind wandered back over the years, and I no longer sought to curb it. In this silent, empty room, what need to conceal my anguish? I looked again on the undimmed scenes that rose immediately in my memory, and allowed myself to dwell with full attention, and fuller emotion, on each. It was like the replay of an old film, seen so often it was known by heart, and long put aside to quell the miseries it evoked — brought out now from its strict incarceration to renew its effect . . . but this time, strangely, I saw many things I had missed before, and mingled with my grief was a bewilderment.

Had it really been like this? Was this really Sophie? In the light of later events I grew confused. Had she not been as I saw her through the years? The thought was incredible, yet it persisted. Was it possible, conceivable . . . that I had lived in a love-bemused fools paradise?

Then, subtly, in close observation of myself, came an even stranger thought. Was this really *me*? The sum total of all that I am, or would wish to be?

I felt perturbed, and after a few moments of indecision, compelled my unwilling faculties to recapitulate in memory my life with Sophie from the other way round, with hindsight — from its end to the beginning . . . It took time, and a sweating concentration. I could not register the effect, but I knew there was one. At length, still quivering inwardly, I let my mind rove further back, unlocking long-sealed doors — reliving in retrospect my years abroad. I tried to remember what I was like in those early days, for I felt I had not been the person Sophie knew . . . Suddenly it all came into focus, and I caught the sense, the essence, the flavour, of an earlier self, almost forgotten but still existent — buried beneath the debris of years.

I'd gone out with enthusiasm, raw, newly qualified, eager for experience — my head full of altruism, school geography, tourist brochures and

the Bhagavad Gita. What I found was squalor, ignorance, terrorism, and crass exploitation. I worked to my fullest capacity, in the naive belief that my efforts could help to alleviate these ills, in Nigeria, Israel, Pakistan — my mind on schools, cottage hospitals and irrigation channels. It all passed again before my gaze, vivid, dusty, teaming and picturesque. And then Egypt. Cairo . . . my Waterloo. My mind shut down on the memory, but relentlessly I probed, and forced myself once more through the government contract, the brutal riots, and the recurrent enteric fever which brought me home.

Grimly disillusioned, I had floundered alarmingly; my overwrought nerves made life a hell, and flooded my horizon with embittered insights, overwhelming me utterly. To add to my dereliction, my mother died soon after my return, and the lonely months that preceded my meeting with Sophie had been filled with saddened, restless query and introspection — a constant sifting and searching for an intangible something to offset the negativity of life as I now viewed it . . .

But there were good things too, I remembered — their sudden recall like a shaft of light. Talks late into the night with Paul and Rupert, friends from my schooldays, and a renewal of companionship with Dave, bluff and hearty and full of life on site, and even more so off it . . . until his father died and he inherited the business, and then he grew up overnight.

At this point I stopped, and tried again my former exercise of moving backward in time, observing each scene in the unfettered freshness and lucidity of afterknowledge. Once more it all looked different, and I felt a kind of shock, as if an underlying facet of my identity had quite specific reasons for all I had passed through, and saw another perspective I could not grasp. Almost as though the whole of it, both bad and good, were by design . . . I shook my head. This was surely absurd — yet remorselessly I made myself continue, strangely aware that in recollection, however painful, lay some panacea — a means of drawing together the sum total of my entire experience in an unspecified form I could in some way utilize — though I did not see how. Behind this section of my life loomed University, with its comradeship and promise, its illusion of freedom and great heights to conquer — and beneath these memories lay public school, a safer world, wherein one lived in dreams, and long and intimate conversations . . .

And before that — it was, ridiculously, even more hurtful to contemplate; for from this period stemmed all my concepts and aspirations. After a momentary tussle I let it flow, hardly crediting the anguish of loss that assailed me, deeper and more poignant even than that connected with my marriage.

I saw again my gentle, intuitive mother — and the austere and honourable ‘old man’. He had always seemed old to me, being fifty when I was born — and I had attributed to him all-wisdom and all-courage, and in this he had never let me down . . . I saw the peaceful, homely country house that seemed unchanging . . . my dog . . . the cats . . . the garden . . . relived the talks, the laughter, the consideration. I remembered as if it were yesterday the air of security and safety, the feeling of refuge, and harbour, in a sea of storms. A world of love and values now long vanished.

I got up quickly and moved around the flat. If there was one thing I feared more than any other it was a bout of morbid depression, and my nervous system had had enough. Desperately I forced myself out to the pub, found Terry and Jill, and involved myself stoically in beer and conversation. Terry was a drama critic and Jill an Arts teacher; they were an entertaining pair and drew like-minded intellectuals like magnets, and the results were invariably interesting and sometimes hilarious, but of late too nostalgic to bear. Wisely they asked no questions, as I had hoped, and included me in as if I had never been away.

At home again I set my will to hold the mood they had moulded in me, but when I slept my defences crumbled, and my life swirled round me helplessly in disconnected pieces. I wandered alone in the darkness, seeking a door behind which sat a man who would succour me. And as I awoke in the early hours, part-numbered by forgetfulness, I again glimpsed the quizzical eyes, enigmatic but kind, of the man with the manuscript.

The following day was dreadful, and I got through it with difficulty, but in the evening I turned once more to my books, and soon the depression began to lift and I felt myself again.

During August, on my third visit to Matthew’s site, on some inexplicable whim I went right out of my way for lunch, to Grantchester. I expect it was nostalgia really, for when a boy I read a lot of Brooke, and Grantchester and Brooke are now synonymous. I had never been there before, and whilst in the vicinity thought I would take the opportunity.

After gazing at the old church and clock tower, I sauntered into the ‘Rose and Crown’ for lunch. It was a very warm day and I had enjoyed my visit. I was also much better in spirits, and sat down feeling unusually content.

Within minutes a voice said, “Mind if I join you?” and a tall, rather untidy looking man took the seat opposite. The pub was quite full — a fact I hadn’t really registered, being deeply absorbed in thought. The man was a genial fellow, vaguely theatrical, cultured, friendly and talkative, and we were soon in conversation about our common interests, music and books, and the similarity of our previous studies. He told me he was a

senior lecturer in English Literature, with a penchant for drama, and the current lead in Shaw's 'Pygmalion' at the local University theatre. He also told me he was forty-five, interested in mysticism, and his name was Adrian B. So pleasant was our conversation that soon I vouchsafed a few details in return, and felt my aloofness melting.

There was a book wedged in my pocket, a paperback which he quickly noticed, and he asked what it was. I fished it out, explaining I'd just that day bought it. Idiotically I felt rather embarrassed. On my way through the city I had spotted a large bookstore, found, astonishingly, an accessible parking space, and slipped in. As I was seeking out my own taste in literature, a book caught my eye and riveted my attention — it was 'The Sufis' by Idries Shah, and without as much as a glance inside I purchased it. It was a thickish book, and I had been comfortably aware of it in my pocket ever since.

I felt myself flush stupidly, like a schoolboy, as I handed it over. "Ah, yes!" said my new acquaintance, "I read this a long time ago!" He thumbed through the pages, narrowing his eyes as if he were remembering some former occasion.

"What did you think of it?"

He smiled blandly and replied, "Academically it's superb, but he *will* relate everything to his own subject, and I really think he goes *too* far. He considers all the great religions stem from Sufism, and all the profoundest thinkers were influenced by it! Even Christianity he takes under its wing, and I couldn't agree *that*." His face was suddenly solemn.

I was absurdly disappointed. Perhaps he noticed my reticent discomfiture, for he continued in a milder tone, "But the fellow who lent it to me regarded it as a bible, and he was no fool. Mensa I.Q.!" He smiled up at me.

"Was he one of this man's students?"

"I'm not sure — but he had some connection I know. He used to consider himself a Sufi." He laughed rather derisively as if at some memory. On impulse I said, "I'd like to meet him. I've been repeatedly confronted by this subject, but can find out little about it in a practical sense. . . ." I paused, tentatively, wondering if I was plunging recklessly into deep water; but Adrian sat back and pressed his fingertips together, like an amiable Professor giving some matter proper consideration. "I'm afraid that's not likely," he said at length, "he left the scene some time ago — heaven knows where he is now." He wrinkled his brow as if unsure whether to say more.

"Was he the only Sufi you were acquainted with?"

"Yes, I think so — though there's someone else I know who was equally interested. She even went to live in Kent — where this chap is, as I expect

you've heard — in the hope of taking part in whatever he was doing." I was interested despite myself.

"Did she achieve it?"

"Again, I don't know. She's back in Cambridge now — I saw her last week as a matter of fact, but couldn't get much out of her." He looked thoughtful, and for a moment, rather sad. After a short pause he said in a quite different voice, serious and concerned — "She won't have anything to do with me these days, at least not socially . . . and I really don't know why. We were all good friends once — night after night we talked together . . . I grew quite dependent on her, in a funny kind of way — used to tell her everything . . ."

I felt rather uncomfortable. He glanced at me and continued hastily, "She wasn't an ordinary person — she was very intuitive, and deeply religious in the mystical sense. I've never known anyone quite like her, either before or since."

"You mean she's mediumistic?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but not in the usual way, though she could read the tarot like a gypsy! More telepathic perhaps; she had vivid precognitive dreams, and she knew things about one without being told. Her advice was very good — I seldom took it, but had to agree afterwards I'd have been better off if I did. I miss it now." He looked rueful.

I was intrigued. "Tell me about her."

"That's difficult. And don't get the wrong idea — she didn't attract me particularly — not my type." Suddenly he looked at his watch — "Oh hell, I've a class in ten minutes. Must go." He stood up. "I can give you her address if you like," he said, "she might talk to you." I didn't answer, but he brought out his pen and a torn-off sheet of paper and scribbled on it, handing it to me as he left. "I enjoyed our talk," he beamed at me, "hope we meet again."

I glanced at the paper, then put it down. I can't go visiting strange women, I thought. Then I picked it up again, and, out of sight in the Gents, tore it into small pieces and threw it in the wastebin. I knew, even so, I was cheating a little, for the address remained imprinted obstinately in my memory.

I read 'The Sufis' from cover to cover — then I reread it. It was the most impactive book I had ever come across. My thoughts circled round the man who wrote it — again and again I found myself thinking of him, even when immersed in calculations, or on site. He was surely another Gurdjieff, but without the dubious reputation Gurdjieff had acquired. This man's character, I felt, was above reproach, even to those who ill-wished him, and one would assume there were some, with his kind of background.

I scoured the Norwich bookshops and found more books — ‘Thinkers of the East’, and ‘The Way of the Sufi’. This latter I loved. It was a compact paperback, and became my constant companion. Any spare moment was used in studying it, and its many quotations from Sufi Masters buried themselves in my consciousness. Under my breath I intoned the Sarmoun Recital, concentrating on the words, dimly aware that their meaning was all important to me:

‘He who knows and does not know that he knows: he is asleep.

Let him become one, whole. Let him be awakened.

He who has known but does not know: let him see once more the beginning of all.

He who does not wish to know, and yet says that he needs to know: let him be guided to safety and to light.

He who does not know, and knows that he does not know: let him, through this knowledge, know.

He who does not know, but thinks that he knows: set him free from the confusion of that ignorance.

He who knows, and knows that *he is*: he is wise. Let him be followed.

By his presence alone man may be transformed.’*

I wrestled constantly with new concepts, annoyed and irritated with myself at times for my own lack of comprehension. One insertion that absorbed me, though its meaning eluded me completely, was the following:

‘Sahl Abdullah once went into a state of violent agitation, with physical manifestations, during a religious meeting. Ibn Salim said: “What is this state?”

Sahl said: “This was not, as you imagine, power entering me. It was, on the contrary, due to my own weakness.”

Others present remarked: “If that was weakness, what is power?”

“Power,” said Sahl, “is when something like this enters, and the mind and body manifest nothing at all.”†

What was it that ‘entered’? — how? and why? I tied myself in knots mentally as I groped for understanding. The cryptic points at the end of Part 1, numbered 1-6, with the concluding paragraph, overturned my past patterns of thinking, and I sought again and again to grasp and assimilate

* Idries Shah: *The Way of the Sufi*, Octagon Press 1968, pp.253.

† Idries Shah: *The Way of the Sufi*, Octagon Press 1968, pp.182.

their implications. I quote them here:

‘The effective study of Sufism today, above all in the West where interest in it is so remarkably widespread, requires the following of the would-be student:

1. Understanding that the bulk of translations available are unsuitable. This is mainly because the originals were intended for specific communities and local audiences and cultures which do not now exist in the same form.
2. Seeking authoritative written and oral materials and activities designed by Sufis to operate in the student’s own culture, time and other circumstances.
3. Recognising that all organisations except genuinely Sufic ones are always conditioning instruments, whether consciously so or otherwise.
4. Being prepared to abandon preconceptions about what ‘study’ constitutes. Readiness to study matters and materials which may not appear to be ‘esoteric’.
5. Deciding whether his search is or is not a disguised form of a search for social integration, a manifestation of sheer curiosity, a desire for emotional stimulus or satisfaction.
6. Crediting, even as a working hypothesis, the possibility that there is a conscious, efficient and deliberate source of legitimate Sufic teaching actually in operation in the West.’

‘This book is intended to illustrate for the general reader something of the richness and range of Sufi ideas. Its materials have also been chosen and are presented as applicable to the people of the contemporary culture, offering an introductory course of study.’*

I had heard of Sufi schools through the works of Ouspensky and Maurice Nicholl, and before my marriage had followed up one or two leads, hoping to find the genuine article; whether genuine or not I had been unable eventually to judge, but they certainly did not assuage the seeker in me; on the contrary, they left me more puzzled and confused than before, and I soon moved on. Now the question rose again, and I thought of the Institute for Cultural Research, and wondered if this was the outer garb of a real Sufi school — or merely the place where a great man chose to work.

Several times I seriously considered writing for information, but on each occasion I got down to it, something put me off. Perhaps it was the recollection of the people at the seminar. They were lively and intelligent,

* Idries Shah: *The Way of the Sufi*, Octagon Press 1968, pp.34/35

judging by appearances — yet still there was that underlying air of academic insularity, which on closer acquaintance in the past, I had found to be ponderous and rigid. In the background of my awareness, was the fear of my own premature and conditioned reactions, and I knew at this stage I could not risk turning away through ignorance and prejudice, from what could eventually prove to be the major pivot of my life.

I needed first to prepare myself, with more information, more careful thought, more experience — though what kind of experience I did not know. Most of all at this moment, I needed to reappraise and rearrange my concepts, and to pick up the shattered pieces of my life and assemble them in a different pattern, assessing, if possible, what it was all for.

It was by now December, cold and dismal. Several times I got soaked through on various sites, and soon developed the inevitable chill with bronchial after effects; and no sooner had I returned to the mounting backlog of work, when a virulent 'flu struck me down, and confined me once more to my room. Dave was kind, but exasperated, and I knew he was thinking the winter had barely begun, and how on earth would I cope later.

Luke brought my shopping, prescriptions, and news of the outside world, whilst I struggled in and out of bed getting hot water bottles and hot drinks, my temperature soaring. The New Year of 1979 dawned, and I hit an all-time low. After-flu depression? Partially perhaps — though I knew it wasn't the sole activating factor. I had pulled down all my structures before I was ill, and they had arraigned themselves nakedly against me in my feverishness. There was nothing left in me solid enough to endure such onslaughts, and my life lay seemingly in ruins at my feet, whilst before me yawned a terrifying void.

As soon as I could study comfortably with a coherent mind unruffled by delirium, I returned to the books, and found my inner polarity had indeed begun to change. At first it was barely perceptible, but as January gave place to February, and then to March, I occasionally caught momentary glimpses of my inner psychology, and perceived a new framework rising from the dereliction of the old.

My pain over Sophie had faded, and though I still loved her and grieved sometimes over her loss, I no longer wished to return to our former life together; it had slipped away into the past, and I was content now to leave it there. My fears about my job had likewise receded, and I grasped at a philosophic acceptance of what seemed increasingly inevitable. My flat, always a refuge and a retreat, became more so, but in a different way. I no longer closed my door to lock out the harshness of the world outside, but to contain the boundary of my inner world, which opened silently, in freshness and increasing power, within.

I found myself becoming curiously serene, though all was externally as before. Dave was still Dave, pushing, coercing, concerned solely with Company life and affairs. Old Sachs continued to rant about the world, and Matthew wrote frequently and with enthusiasm from the Lebanon. Bryce-Jones absorbed himself in 'Penthouse' and similar human indignities, and Whiting's furrowed brow grew more so, as he pored over the complexities of rising costs, exorbitant tenders and alarming audits. They were all just as they had always been. Nothing had changed, save myself.

But this state of affairs, and my passive acceptance of it, was not to last. Unknown to me then, other events were moving in on me, to shatter my new found peace willy-nilly.

In early March, with the first stirrings of spring in the air, I journeyed again to Grantchester. It was a Monday, and I hoped rather half-heartedly to find Adrian there and have another talk with him. No luck; he wasn't, and I believe I felt almost a sneaking sense of relief, though I could not say why.

I had earlier inspected the final stages of Matthew's conversion, which had been complicated and delayed by the addition of a small annex, but it was all virtually finished now, and after lunch I went back for what I expected to be the last time. Annoyingly, some young idiot of a decorator's apprentice had tipped over a pot of paint on the stone balustrade, and we had to get that seen to, and with other minor complications I found I would have to return the following day. Duff was apologetic, but it wasn't his fault, and in fact I was rather pleased.

I liked Cambridge increasingly, and had tentatively begun to formulate the possibility of buying a place here. It would do me good, I felt, to leave Norwich, and start afresh somewhere else, away from my former haunts. It wouldn't make much difference workwise — Dave moved us around all the time, and we were frequently away for varying periods. The Norwich offices were easily accessible by train, and only fifty-five miles or so by road. I noted the careful blanking of my mind to obvious difficulties, but I knew too, without openly acknowledging it, I was preparing myself for further change.

After final inspections with Duff, and the usual winding-up banter, I tackled the prolific Cambridge estate agents, and was rather disappointed to find nothing I liked of the size or price I had in mind. I found myself at length near the Arts Theatre, and decided to use their restaurant for lunch. It was rather late, and uncomfortably crowded. I held a laden self-service tray and looked around for somewhere to sit. A woman was watching me, and motioned a place beside her. I sat down, thanking her, and we got into conversation. She was in her early fifties I imagine, stylish and well-spoken, with a youthful approach to life.

It seemed she held a responsible post in one of the Ministries, and she chattered cheerfully of her affairs, whilst probing gently into mine. It was skilfully and charmingly done, and my mind, still dwelling on flats and cottages, lapsed its customary guard and allowed itself to divulge its tastes, and the type of literature it found absorbing. I even mentioned, guilelessly, 'The Sufis'.

The effect was volcanic. She, too, was interested in Sufism; she had "felt all along" we were kindred spirits — our contact was undoubtedly "intended". She touched my hand with comradely affection and I felt myself flinch inwardly, yet I knew I was being unfair. I could bring myself to make no comment, but she didn't notice. She was saying she received their monthly newsletter, and did I know of it? I replied weakly I did not. She then informed me that there were many Sufis in Cambridge — two groups of them. One was a kind of 'hippy' community "mainly for young people", but the other was of a different type, and connected with the University.

I felt rather dazed. Instead of experiencing pleasure, I was dismayed. The very word 'hippy' nauseated me; it was synonymous in my associative processes with slovenliness, 'pot', and all things sordid and run-down. I found suddenly I was no longer hungry, and placed aside my knife and fork. My new friend talked on, and I felt unjust and guilty. She was incredibly sympathetic — doing her best to be helpful and kind. I knew quite well that Dave would take one look and crudely label her 'man-eater', but Dave was a ladies man and knew what he was about. I had been trained throughout my life to exhibit poise and assurance, and could carry without difficulty a 'role', but beneath it all lay very limited experience of the 'femme fatale', apart from Sophie, and I felt suddenly overwhelmed by my gaucheness.

Joanna (she had told me her name) now took me in hand. It so happened there was a Sufi meeting that evening — a special one, with an appointed leader travelling some distance to be speaker. Why didn't I go? Here was my opportunity to follow up my studies with direct contact, and it could only be by design. She smiled delightedly, expecting me to feel a proper awe at this intervention of destiny, and I in my turn sweated silently and profusely because I did not.

Politely, I tried to disentangle myself without giving offence, but she pressed time and place upon me. And then she said, regrettably she could not attend herself on this occasion, having arranged a prior appointment before learning of tonight's meeting, but we could meet there next time? She smiled engagingly again, and something inside me turned right way up once more. "I'll try," I said, and expressing haste and a busy afternoon, made my departure.

After reflection I realised I was foolish to let pass this proffered connection with what so wholeheartedly occupied my thoughts and attention. My own hesitation was puzzling, but I assumed it based on past disappointment, and my groundless fear of its repetition.

I had not memorised the address, but found it, as I had hoped, on the noticeboard inside the city library. A small poster advertised the event in a private house. I spent the afternoon looking at various properties, and in the evening, with some difficulty found my way to a large residence on the city outskirts.

There were about thirty persons present, and we were all ushered into a substantial drawing-room and seated before the slim, elegant, and rather sweet-faced lady who was to talk to us. My mind lapsed almost at once into a confused state of conflict, as I registered wildly my own reactions and emotions, which refused to line up with all I knew of Sufism. On the 'pro' side was Idries Shah — his words that I had pondered, the profundities of his mode of expression, and the undeniable ring of truth that permeated his work. And here before me was the actual manifestation of that work — Sufism in operation — the 'con'. It did not make sense.

I recognised no-one from the seminar, indeed, even their 'type' was not included in the very mixed gathering, which nevertheless consisted mainly of older women. The few men present appeared rather indeterminate and colourless, and one unSufi-like individual, to my untutored and critical eye, even looked decidedly devious. I told myself these were obviously a minority cross-section of Sufis, and that my wayward impressions were purely associative and should be ignored.

The speaker had a beautiful voice, well modulated and perfectly pitched. It was clearly apparent that she herself was a person of character, integrity and charm — but an appointed Sufi teacher? I felt doubtful. Surprisingly she read from notes, and elaborated on them. During the first minutes of her talk I thought I had done them all a gross injustice; but then I felt simply astonishment. The talk was completely incoherent. Beautifully formulated, meaningful phrases, but thrown together in a hotch-potch of disjointed and unfinished paragraphs.

Stripped of the references to eminent Sufis of past centuries, there was nothing one might not hear in any church, or from any spiritualist rostrum, and to my thinking, the substance of it had close kinship with the latter. It was not remotely like anything written by Idries Shah, neither did it mention him. At the end of the discourse, which was very brief, another lady of similar type expressed thanks and comments with like incoherence, and I wondered, for an incredulous moment, if they both suffered some cerebral aberration.

It was time now for questions, most of which were irrelevant to Sufism,

and curiously reminiscent of the type expected from devotees of Indian sects. One only I found interesting, and this related to certain exercises of a vocal nature, apparently open to them all. These intonations (one was demonstrated) were very powerful, and took place at the back of the larynx as far as I could judge — using the uvula in a way unfamiliar to western races.

It was stunningly effective; I felt a resonance within myself responding to the uttered vibration. Surely, I thought, in a person without proper preparation (and there was no mention of such) this could produce a stimulation in part of the brain itself, with possible consequent effects akin to those I had observed? At this point my ignorance enveloped me, and I knew I did not understand sufficiently the mechanism of the brain or the power of sound to make such assumptions.

There was a lull in the questions, and as the chairman looked as if about to conclude the meeting, I put up my hand, and asked if Shah's books were studied by all their members. There was a brief silence, then the speaker replied that they had no connection with Idries Shah. They considered his books were "useful" in spreading knowledge of the existence of Sufism, but he was not recognised by them as a teacher. She ended that many of his supposed pupils had visited their main Centre for advice, and she had thought personally that "they were all rather lost."

I was puzzled, and then angry; the impulse to protest rose strongly, but before I could formulate the words, the impetus dissolved surprisingly into a relieved good humour. The young man beside me was saying earnestly, "Shah's not a Sufi you know, he's just a writer who collects Sufi stories. We have all his books in our library . . ." as if this proved it. I murmured benignly and politely. Tea was dispensed, and I noticed a table spread with literature presumably for sale, which I promptly moved towards. The books displayed were written by the movement's leader, who may be the greatest of great saints for all I knew — yet I felt no urge to buy them. I left then, and booked in at a small guesthouse for the night. Something inside me was singing like an exultant bird after a storm. I did not try to rationalise it. In a rarified spirit, I slept.

My work in Cambridge being finished, I spent the next few weeks oscillating between Devon and Surrey, returning to base like a homing pigeon as soon as I could. My flat, however, seemed to have lost its charm for me. It felt more empty than usual when I came in, and I was restless and unable to settle. It was now mid-April, and I had a long weekend at my disposal, nobly granted by Dave, who occasionally rotated us for this privilege. I decided to revisit Cambridge and try all the Agents again, but strangely my search was as unproductive as before, despite the abundance of property available.

I made my way to Grantchester at lunchtime, not expecting to see Adrian on a Saturday, as he would surely be at home. But lo, there he was, already seated, and closely attending a large rare steak. "May I?" — I touched a chair at his table — he indicated pleasure, and that I should join him. After a few minutes he said, still wrestling with the steak, "Well, did you see her?"

"See who?" I laughed, knowing quite well.

"The woman I told you of — Kate." Oddly enough, it *had* slipped my mind. I must have deliberately forgotten her, I reasoned to myself, for I had known at once to whom he referred.

"I'm afraid I mislaid her address," I said guiltily.

"Oh well, that's soon remedied," he replied, and reeled it off. I knew then I hadn't forgotten it at all, but submerged it somewhere in my memory — perhaps labelled 'pending'. I smiled wryly to myself. After Joanna I was doubly wary.

"How's the search going?" asked Adrian, "Found any good Sufis lately?" He laughed boyishly at his own joke, which I guessed was a parody on 'Read any good books, etc.'

"Regretfully not," I replied. And I told him then of the odd synchronicity (we had both read Jung) of the events leading from the Arts restaurant to my attendance of a lecture. He roared with laughter, loudly and embarrassingly; and at first I did not grasp why.

"Joanna!" he spluttered, "you've met Joanna! — why, my dear fellow, you don't know just *how* synchronitic it was yet! I know her well, and we both know Kate, have done for years. She was one of the group I mentioned . . . Lord! She'd have had a field day if she realised you might visit *her*!"

I did not enquire to what he alluded. I experienced again the familiar, sinking sense of conflict — my reluctance to involve myself further, and yet the pressing parallel need to do so.

I recognised I did not altogether like Adrian — he was rather insensitive to say the least — and as for Joanna . . . If this Kate was of the same ilk I did not wish to meet her — it was all so difficult to judge, so mazelike and obscure. I turned the conversation into calmer channels, and over my meal we discussed the theatre, much safer ground.

In the afternoon I browsed in the bookshops, and discovered, on a bottom shelf of the oriental department in Heffers huge basement, a little row of books by my mentor. With sudden pleasure, I bent down and gathered together several titles quite new to me, and wrote out a cheque feeling my visit to Cambridge had been to some purpose after all. Once home again, I lit a fire in a carefree spirit, and settled in comfortably for a solid 'read'.

There was a small volume which appeared less of a textbook than those

I'd read formerly, and held more of the man himself. It was called 'Reflections', and I decided to try this first. Opening the inner jacket to first skim the 'blurb', I found a small photograph, not well printed, but clear enough to see features and the stamp of identity. The face was aquiline, noble, and somewhat austere. In mute wonder I recognised the man whose face I had studied in the London dining room.

So I had actually met him; this teacher - this Sufi exemplar, for such I knew with certitude he was. And with equal certitude, for the briefest of moments, I knew beyond doubt that the odd sequence of events continually linking me to him, had been, by means unknown to me, deliberately engineered for this purpose. But it was for only a moment, and after it passed, I slipped once more into my everyday self, and read steadily on through the early part of the night.

There was, of course, a disadvantage to such prolonged reading. With novels etc. it did not matter, but Shah's work, I had noted, demanded the concentrated energy of complete attention, and it was in the long run much more productive to read little and often. This I did later, as a planned course of study, but initially I was like a gluttonous child, stuffing myself voraciously and unable to digest the intake all at once.

The following Monday, Dave summoned me to his office. This of itself was unusual, and his manner was likewise. "Look here, old chap," he began quietly, which wasn't Dave at all. My nervous system, far from relaxing at this approach, stood on its hackles as if waiting attack.

"I expect you know poor Phillips is back?"

I did not — this was news to me. Phillips was my current Middle East successor.

"What happened?" I asked cautiously, as Dave carefully lit a cigarette.

"Well, he got some kind of hepatitis with complications, and they flew him in last night. You'll see him soon, he'll call in on his way to the specialist — it's not the infectious type." He paused. I sensed what was coming, but said nothing. "Fact is, Alex, we've no-one senior out there at all at the moment — Burgess and Griggs have their own work to do, and Joliffe can't be expected to take over for at least another year. We have a large contract two-parts finished, and it's imperative we get someone out fast."

"How about Dixon? He's always reminiscing about the old days . . ." I had said the first name that came into my head.

"Dixon! Good God no! He's past it. Strictly between you and I, Alex, though Dixon's only fifty he's an old man already." I knew this was true. I also knew what had made him so.

"Blunthell? Bryce-Jones?"

"Oh, come — Blunthell's all tied up in Scotland, and Bryce-Jones isn't

really the type we want out there. Anyway, he's lined up for the States. If we mess him about, he'll leave us. You know these up and coming chaps."

"Bell? Drysdale?" I knew I sounded desperate. He cut me short. "Fact is, Alex, as you know darned well, you're the only senior qualified man we have available at the moment who knows all the ropes for the East."

I felt stunned. Once it had spelled opportunity, and I had seized it with both hands. My mind flashed back to the years of my strength — the bodily strength I could no longer depend on.

He was waiting. I said woodenly — "I'm sorry, Dave, you know how it is with me. I can't face it all again."

"But things are different now — " his voice was persuasive, "we've moved on since then — might even do you good to get away from this damp climate! I'm not asking you to go permanently Alex, just for a few weeks till I get something sorted out — "

I swore under my breath, foreseeing the endless complications involved in agreement, and the equally fraught ones concomitant with refusal. But there was really no choice. "No, Dave." I said firmly, "I'm sorry, but I can't."

Not surprisingly he didn't like it, and I couldn't blame him. It was, after all, not unreasonable of him to ask. Yet I knew Dave and our loaded work situation too well to be deceived by "a few weeks" — a few months was more likely, and my entire psychology stirred in protest. I didn't *want* to go — everything in me resisted it. Even *I* was dismayed at the extent of my own unwillingness. Whatever the reasons, and however stubborn and ungracious I appeared, I simply could not comply.

Dave's eyes held mine, and I knew he reined his temper with much effort. "Can't you oblige me even in an emergency?" he enquired levelly, "until we can get someone out?" He jabbed his part-smoked cigarette with vigour in the ashtray, spluttering red ash — and I grasped that my career was about to capsize, yet I could not stop it. "I'm sorry, Dave," I repeated wearily, "but no, I cannot. My system won't take it."

There was nothing more to be said. With controlled fury he dismissed me, and I knew quite well it would not be forgotten. Later that morning I saw Phillips emerge from Dave's suite, looking primrose yellow and alarmingly fragile. He stopped for a quick word with me, and I noted the slight nervous tic under his left eye — the dry skin, the tension. Poor devil, I thought, remembering the heat and the flies, and the continual under-tones of violence.

Dave resolved the situation by going himself, and taking Hilliard to 'break in'. His mood was titanic and inscrutable, but with a curt civility, he left me in charge. At least, it gave me a breathing space, and there was

a certain relief in the realisation that he would never again line me up for overseas employment. I felt deeply that a whole section of my life was ending, and what to do next I could not as yet formulate. But I decided suddenly that I would see this Kate after all — I must leave no stone unturned, no lead unchecked, that was at this time presented me. I accepted that my inbuilt reactions — which were beyond me to alter, at least for the moment — were as concrete a guideline as I would have, and there was in fact no choice but to follow them. Soberly I thought over the past year's events, mentally acknowledging the intervention in my affairs as an emerging path of destiny. It led me darkly into the future; yet I felt strangely that I was not alone. Unseen, and but dimly sensed, the baraka of the Sufi worked within me, and charted my course to a destination unknown.

I posted a note to Kate, immediately regretting it, but it was too late then. A few days later came a reply; it was 'a rather unusual request' to make, and she wasn't sure if she could be of any use, but because of my interest in Shah's books she would see me. The note was quite neatly written in a firmish hand on primrose paper. Very formal — no Joanna here.

I tried to visualise her as I drove to Cambridge on Saturday afternoon of the following week. Small, rather prim — greying hair? Or tall and practical; a biblical Martha? Perhaps plump and dreamy, most obviously a medium? I gave it up. It did not really matter. I hoped fervently it wouldn't prove too embarrassing or boring for either of us, and would soon be over.

She lived in a small, greyish semi-detached house built at the turn of the century, in a tree-lined greyish street near the river. The door had been recently painted cream and there were wallflowers en masse in the narrow front garden, all pressing colourfully into bloom. The short flagged path was old and uneven, but weedfree and clean.

She came at once to the door at my ring, and I stared at her, suddenly unsure. None of my imaginings had any basis in truth and I probably looked as surprised as I felt. Adrian had said she was fifty, yet this wasn't obviously apparent — she appeared in fact much younger and was unexpectedly attractive. You could see she had been a pretty and shapely woman, and this lingered very well . . .

"Hello," she said — "come in," and I entered the hall, and followed her into the sitting room. She seemed rather shy, and we sat for a few moments conversing formally. Her face was mobile — in manner she was hesitant, almost timid — anxious to please, sympathetic — and vulnerable. And yet paradoxically at the same time she was warm and engaging, shrewd and perceptive, strong and assured. This much I registered with rapidity in the first half-hour of my visit.

She asked me at length what exactly had prompted my request to see her. I tried to tell her, in sequence, what had happened to me from the date of the seminar, and whilst I talked impressions flowed into me, vividly and continuously, recording with a dreamlike lucidity her presence and surroundings.

The room we sat in had a large bay window, and long curtains of deep damson coloured velvet; the ceiling had been emulsioned a soft apricot, and the walls were off-white, with one wall covered with a multi-rose patterned Sanderson paper. The fitted carpeting was plain turquoise blue, and the furniture an odd mixture of beechwood, cane, and polished mahogany, which created a strangely harmonious effect. Plants were in abundance, and a china bowl of wallflowers wafted their scent, mingling with a faint odour of pot-pourri, and a subtler undertone of sandalwood incense.

I noted that she was simply and smartly dressed. She wore court shoes, and her hair was short and softly curled. She wasn't stylish, like Joanna, nor elegant like Sophie. She was, in fact, so unlike all I had thought of her, that I floundered like an idiot, off-keel, and my narration seemed inordinately long and involved.

She must have seen that I was nervous — maybe it helped her, for she suddenly relaxed and suggested tea, which she fetched, with sandwiches and cake, and pressed upon me for all the world as if she were my mother. Indeed, some facet of her nature reminded me very much of that gentle woman, and increased my kaleidoscopic impressions. All at once things settled down, and we talked naturally together; my normal self surfacing and reasserting it equipoise.

It was then that I realised how alike we were. In a swift perception I saw my psychology mirrored in her own . . . it was a curious sensation. I could link her neither with Adrian nor with Joanna, and could not imagine the many evenings they had supposedly spent together. She was aware of my inner questioning, but said she was anxious not to say too much, too soon, and in the wrong order, or I would find it even more confusing. But she took very seriously my progressive experience, and suggested it was time I wrote to Shah himself.

This created an immediate impasse in my mind. Until now I had been swept along with the tide, passively, like a slumbering infant. It struck me forcibly as she spoke that I could henceforth no longer do this. In approaching Kate I had somehow concretised my inner search, bringing it through to my everyday life. It could not remain a purely subjective factor any longer. I knew this with impactive certitude, but could not analyse why.

She understood, though I had said nothing, and expressed it as a fact.

She added, however, that although for me this would be an act of the deepest significance, tantamount almost to a committal — I should not expect a commensurate reply. Or even a reply at all.

“But surely in common politeness there *must* be a reply!”

“It’s usual,” she said, “but don’t depend on it.”

“What would be the point? People would turn away without giving themselves a chance . . .”

“People like you *don’t* ‘turn away’ Alex — no matter what. And it’s only people like you who may not get replies — or at least replies they find satisfactory.”

I was non-plussed. There seemed no sense in it. I looked up from the cup in my hand to see that she was smiling at me.

“You’re joking!” I remarked, and smiled back at her — but she laughingly shook her head.

“Alex,” she said gently, “you must know by now that genuine teachers work unpredictably — we can’t gauge their reasons, nor assess their degree of intervention in our lives. We can’t even judge our own level of development, let alone anything else! Shah is beyond doubt a Sufi exemplar — perhaps *the* Exemplar for the Western world at this time. It’s customary for all Sufi teachers to submit their intended pupils to tests, and the form these will take can’t possibly be known by the pupil in advance, however astute and intelligent he may be. You must remember that the entire process is concerned with inner development, and this can never be entered upon lightly — sometimes there are impediments which must first be cleared away — ” Her tone was light, but her eyes were serious. She appeared to hesitate, then said, “Occasionally it requires a shock — perhaps of some severity to the psychology . . . rather like the blowing-up and dispersal of an obstacle. If this is so, or arduous treatment is necessary for any reason — it will probably be shown in a dream so that adequate preparation can be made, and inwardly the pupil will have some understanding of what is required — but nothing more! Whatever the case, one should accept what is given, even if unpalatable at the time, and on no account become resentful, feel insulted, or refuse to ‘play’ — for there is no doubt that a letter from Shah — (or no letter at all!) can activate most effectively one’s current need.”

This was disconcerting. I knew enough of Gurdjieff’s work, and the activities of several Indian teachers such as Upasni Maharaj and Meher Baba, also the Sufi teachers mentioned in Shah’s books, to realise that some pupils got very rough treatment and most often those that were exemplary, to their own astonishment and distress. But surely not through the vehicle of a letter!

Suddenly suspicious, I asked guardedly — “What makes you think he

may treat *me* in this fashion? There must be dozens, perhaps hundreds of people who write to him — look at the Institute members for instance! — and receive courteous and perfectly normal replies I'm sure."

She laughed infectiously; "I didn't say that he would. And you are of course correct about his correspondence. There's no reason to assume his reply to yourself (if he does reply) would be other than a routine one. That is precisely what I mean. You are not taking into account the fact that for you, your own letter, however worded, will have been in essence anything but 'routine'. And you may therefore feel acutely disappointed."

There was an aroma of adroit evasion in this, but I let it pass. "How did you fare, if you don't mind my asking? I'm sure you must have written to him yourself."

"Oh yes, many times over the years. You must bear in mind though, that what is applicable to one may not be so to another — ." I remembered the highly developed intuitive faculty Adrian had spoken of. "I suppose he was very kind to you," I said, in a matter-of-fact voice which belied my apprehensive conviction that she had gone in where I had little hope of following.

"On the contrary," her eyes were amused, "he made me wait for nine years on his doorstep, with hardly a crumb of either consolation or encouragement, and then he only opened it wide enough for me to peer inside. But I don't think that's usual. I don't think he will do this to you."

I felt perplexed. Having talked with her, it seemed inconceivable that she had not been ushered into the Institute speedily and with approbation.

"Do you know why you had such a long wait?"

"I do now," she said, "but it has only emerged clearly in the last two years. There was a lot of preparatory work to be done. Sometimes one can only be strengthened sufficiently by standing alone, and the surest and quickest way to relocate one's roots is to find oneself seemingly cut-off from them."

"Pretty drastic, I should think."

"It was; but at least I was shown the way step by step in advance, as I've already mentioned. I had no idea what it was all about, or where it was leading, but I was given a glimpse of the immediate stretch ahead, and there was no choice but to follow it."

"It must have been helpful to have no choice — at least you couldn't make a mistake!"

"Unfortunately it wasn't as simple as that. The 'glimpse' was inevitably symbolic, and it wasn't until a definite decision had been taken with all its agonised pros and cons, that I saw there was nothing else I could have done. It happened every time. These situations are never easy. They're not designed to be so!"

Her words affected me — I felt intensely they were in some way applicable to myself also. I said, "Can you tell me about it in detail?" wondering at the same time how well I would stand such trials.

"I will one day — at least as far as I can explain it — but we must go slowly to begin with, and take first things first!" She switched the conversation into more general channels, and after a while I found myself telling her of my life with Sophie, then of my earlier years, and even my boyhood.

Time passed swiftly, and with reluctance I eventually left for home. The roads were dark but quiet, and I thought over my visit as the car sped smoothly along. It had not been as I anticipated, and there were a host of unanswered questions still pressing in my mind, plus a few fresh ones, largely about Kate herself. I realised wryly that even had I asked them, she would undoubtedly have circled round them in some way, evading the issue until other things were detailed first.

I had the impression that she knew quite well what she was talking about, and beneath the rather vulnerable exterior, could be surprisingly firm. Quite obviously I would have to play it her way if I wished to learn more. Yet my feelings were of pleasure and satisfaction as I pottered around the flat before turning-in for bed with the inevitable book, and I resolved to see her again as soon as reasonably possible. In the meantime, I knew, I must think about writing to Shah.

And think I certainly did. It was on my mind day and night, mostly in the background but nevertheless there; and yet I could not get down to it.

I spent Sunday mulling it over intermittently to no avail. Three times I sat down with paper and pen, and on each occasion after a few sentences, gave up. I could not find the right words, nor was I sure what I wished to say, and above all I knew my letter must be sincere — it should not be written haphazardly. It seemed I waited for something within me to take shape. I became annoyed with my own incapacity, and eventually wrote to Kate instead, telling her of my difficulty.

The next two weeks were hectic beyond belief; the phone in Dave's office rang non-stop, and work piled up relentlessly in his absence. I coped with it all as best I could, but efficiency alone could not surmount the increasing backlog, and it grew more nerve-wracking each day. Problems arose, both administrative and practical, requiring immediate attention, and as always in such abnormal situations, the momentum accelerated all round, and the main office was inundated in its own right.

I had Luke running hither and thither like an errand boy, and Sachs tore at what little hair he had left, with increasing exasperation at the repeated interruptions and excessive demands on his time and attention, when he already legitimately had more than enough to get on with. The

unhappy Wisbey developed hay-fever and retired altogether for several days, unable to take his streaming nose plus Sachs's growing irritability under pressure.

Dixon sprained his wrist over the weekend and could neither write nor type, which put him nicely out of action, and the others worked full-tilt and even overtime, but we still couldn't catch up. It was obvious we needed more staff, but senior appointments were outside my province and I could only push on doing my utmost, and working all hours and a seven-day week.

It was maddeningly frustrating. I found myself perpetually seething, and cursing my lack of time, and in a bad mood I set out for Sussex on the morning of the Sunday I had hoped to see Kate.

There was thunder in the air and a clammy heat which did not improve my temper. Nor did the client that awaited me, the middleaged woman of the convalescent home, who was now having an annex built and had thoughtlessly decided to 'change horses in mid stream'. She had fresh ideas, and required amendments and alterations to a building already well past the foundation stage, without, of course, the attendant delays involved in planning applications, etc. Accustomed to having her own way on her own terms, she proved unusually difficult to deal with, and by the end of our business consultations I was ready to explode. Nor was this the end of it; the contractor had arranged a tight schedule involving many workmen, and swore viciously about the proposed hold-up, not unnaturally demanding compensation. What with sorting this out, and soothing and placating the ruffled client, my store of tact and patience was exhausted, and by midday Wednesday I felt the old familiar throb at the back of my eyes that heralded migraine.

I erupted silently as I headed for home again, aware of the mass of papers to be dealt with when I got there. In the midst of my ill-humour a thought filtered through from another strata of my existence, and I recalled in a startling flash of self-awareness, that I was near the place of my constant imaginings, and the home of the man I intended to contact. Kate had given me the address of the Institute, which was in Kent, just outside Tunbridge Wells, and I could easily pass that way on my return route.

It would create a delay no doubt, but I was past caring, and suddenly the only thing of any consequence to me was to find this haven so often in my thoughts, and at least to gaze upon the precincts where the teacher had his work.

I followed the map, stubbornly ignoring my recalcitrant head, and after passing through East Grinstead and surrounding villages, came at last upon a large white house set back upon a village green, in picturesque

surroundings, and with pretty cottages fringing the connecting lanes in flowery abundance.

I parked the car opposite, alongside the green itself, and looked longingly at the house, with its green shutters and air of calmness and rural peace. No-one was about. It stood silent in its timbered grounds, and hedges and walls concealed whatever movements there may have been in its vicinity.

Light traffic passed along the road, but did not disturb the tranquility of the green. I got out of the car and walked towards the church that stood on the fringe of the property — ‘All Saints’ read the noticeboard — and then I walked back, my eyes absorbing every detail. Once more in the car I felt a pent-up overflow of frustrated emotion, a deep-rooted yearning completely at variance with my mundane situation. It was obviously quite within reason to call at the house and enquire legitimately for details of the Institute. Yet it was as if an iron hand held me, and I knew I could not do this.

I felt he was there, the Teacher, somewhere within those walls — and that he knew I was here, suffering and miserable outside. I knew too, that for the moment he would not let me in. However natural my intended mode of enquiry, however usual my proposed approach, he would not permit me to make them. And I knew this so surely, it evoked an instantaneous and overwhelming longing, like a pain burning deep in my heart, so intense that tears rose spontaneously and forced themselves from my eyes in a turmoil of acute sensation. I could scarcely contain it with equilibrium, and gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands, biting down hard on my lower lip.

Shocked by the engulfing magnitude of the experience, I inbreathed deeply to regain control. It was beyond all rational explanation, searing, yet with a sense of the exquisite; an epitome of feeling hitherto unexperienced, and wholly unexpected. I blinked furiously, my eyes still fixed on the house, and after some minutes fraught with bitter conflict, moved out from the green and drove towards Tunbridge Wells. Many miles further on, through London and beyond, I came to the realisation that the agonised pain was ebbing from me, as also was the insidious throbbing behind my eyes, and I did not develop migraine after all. Even so, both took their toll of me, and I slept that night the sleep of deep exhaustion.

With dawnlight I woke, and lay remembering the dream still vividly infusing my mind. I had been in old Arabia, and had sat at the feet of an aged Sufi, who looked gently upon me, without speaking, and with an expression of such tender benevolence in his eyes that my heart appeared to open. At that moment I *knew* with swift certainty that I had been his pupil; that at some former time in my existence I had entered a school,

and received a training, the knowledge and details of which were as yet unconceived by my present day self.

At 6.30 a.m. I pulled myself from bed, and sat at the old oak desk in my sitting-room. After some minutes words flowed from my pen, and I wrote my elusive letter from that level of myself which strove to develop and change, and on my way to Dave's bedlamic office, posted it to Idries Shah.

Six days later Dave returned, and never had I been more glad to see him. He was rather aloof with me, and I did not expect otherwise, but I could see he was satisfied that Hilliard could cope, and equally satisfied with the way things had been handled at this end. He at once set in motion the necessary procedures for increase of staff, and brought back temporarily from retirement, a man who had left us two years ago. The tension decreased with astonishing speed and we breathed again.

I resolved at this point to ease myself from the position whereby I could be called upon in any emergency to act as Dave's adjutant, but discovered, and felt rather piqued ironically, that he was forestalling me; for we learned that in August Matthew would be returning from abroad, and had already accepted Dave's offer to join the Company as his personal assistant and eventual co-partner. A straw in the wind, I thought, and pondered on it.

With my evenings free again, I turned once more to my books, and having by this time obtained every book published by Shah, including two new ones from Octagon Press, who appeared to have a monopoly of his work, I found myself fully occupied.

I had also arranged to see Kate again, and this time approached the tree-lined grey street with very different feelings from before. Her smile was welcoming, and she led me out to the pretty rear garden where we sat for a while in the warm May sunshine, drinking her delectable home-made lemonade.

I noticed that she wore a vivid summer dress with a white, lacy stole, which suited her well — and hooped silver earrings that gave her an almost gipsylike appearance. She talked quickly and with animation, gesturing with her hands to indicate things she had planted, and plying me with questions with such charming vivacity that I felt quite amazed at the different facets of her personality. Suddenly she became the more serious person that I remembered, and I told her of my letter, and the events that led up to my writing it.

As I finished I commented how strange it was to be able to talk about these matters to someone else, and she said "Not really. Don't you realise that it's because we have both experienced similar things, and there is no question of misunderstanding." I hadn't thought of this, and knowing so little of her, asked if she too had passed through this deep and quite incomprehensible anguish.

"Oh, Alex, yes! — so acutely and for so long, I thought at one time I would die of it!"

I stared at her, hardly able to credit what she had said. "How long, Kate? And when?"

"It was many years ago now . . . more than fourteen — " she caught the look of puzzlement in my eyes and stopped — .

"But you didn't know Shah then!"

"No, I learned of him in 1968. From 1962 I was with another teacher, who eventually directed me to Shah. He died in 1969."

I digested this. "But if that's so, why did he make you wait so long? You must have already undergone some very specific preparation — "

She laughed at me, aware of my obvious perturbation. "Alex, what knots you tie me in! I can't answer you straightforwardly, just like that — it isn't so simple! You should already realise this. The connections are made on inner levels, and work their way through time into our lives. And the more specific the preparation, the longer it's likely to take — dependent naturally on what it is *for*! It's too early still to try to explain to you — we don't yet know each other well enough — "

"How will I ever know you well enough if you won't answer my questions?" I said, feeling rather exasperated. It was a childish thing to say, and she looked immediately downcast.

"Please don't feel offended. It depends entirely on the questions you ask. And not only that — it's to do with the unfoldment of a relationship, which provides a kind of indispensable framework. You tend to jump in at the deep end and ask the most complex questions first! I was the same, and I understand now how difficult I made things, and why I so seldom was given a direct reply."

I had to smile despite myself. I had hardly given her time to tell me of even the mundane things in her life, so avid was my desire for information. "To get back to the original question," I said. "What actually is this sensation? — it feels like a form of burning — heatless, but burning nevertheless — and an overwhelming emotion of the deepest, most intolerable kind . . . "

Her expression was inscrutable. "Why do you suppose the original Catholics portrayed a flaming heart in their paintings?" she replied quietly, "Or even a wounded heart that bled. The Sufi mystics spoke of 'burning hearts', or being 'consumed' with grief, or 'annihilated' by love. These aren't just poetic expressions or flights of fancy — they relate to a mystical state hardly recognised in the Western world, of which you were given but a foretaste."

"A foretaste! My God, had it been more severe I would have been immobilised!"

"Don't worry," she said — "you can't experience these things by chance, nor without preparation. It has happened to you before, and inwardly you are aware of it."

She was gazing at me intently, as if trying to gauge how much I understood. I realised, helplessly, it was exceedingly little, even less than I'd assumed. I tried to draw her further on the subject. She hedged a bit, then commented — "Initially, it's a state that comes and goes. It changes subtly — by degrees. As we turn more persistently inwards, aspiration increases — resolving itself into spiritual longing . . ."

"Initially? It can become perpetual?"

"For a time. Read your classics! But don't alarm yourself — you can't understand it until you experience it fully, and a few words from me won't convey much. Also, whatever the mystics may have expressed on the subject — however anguished or agonised their condition — it is transitory and ultimately transformative. They later regard the possession of this state as their greatest treasure and a gift from God. Remember that."

I grasped that she didn't wish me to probe further; but our companionship was pleasurable, and the warm sunshine enhanced a sense of general wellbeing. After a few minutes of silent appreciation of this, I tried another tack before yielding finally to the requirements of patience. "Do you suppose, Kate, we might have known each other before, in some past existence?"

"I'm quite sure we have."

"Perhaps in a school situation similar to the one in my dream?"

"That seems very probable." She emptied the last of the lemonade into my glass, and moved a little away from me, into the shade of the green-gage tree. I followed suit, and continued; "Have you any memories yourself, brought over from sleep, or in some other way . . .?"

She hesitated, and then said non-committally; "I've experienced many things . . . but as for actual memories, I'm seldom sure — our brains distort unfamiliar impressions so easily. What appears to me more important is the way consciousness can be expanded, and our limited 'I' transcended. If one genuinely experiences entry into a finer state of being, it's like being born into another dimension altogether; with an actual sensation of effort and emergence, parallel to human birth, though the effort isn't physical, nor mental — and from that perspective everything looks different. The whole process of life as we know it is seen in a new context — virtually impossible to verbalise at all."

I sighed deeply and resigned myself to ignorance. Perhaps she took pity on me, for she said suddenly, "One dream experience that comes to my mind, connects I believe with a training process. It began as I was climbing a very high hill, or mountain, in burning sunshine, behind an old man

I knew as my teacher. I was a young woman, Mayan I think, or Peruvian — my hair was long and black and fell in front of me in plaits as I bent forward, scrambling over rock. I could see the hem of the old man's robe — it was white, with a strange design on the border, reminiscent of Greek or even Egyptian decoration."

"He carried a staff, and as we reached a certain height he said to me, 'Do you remember when you were here before?' and I turned round and looked at the scenery. Far below was the sea, stretching boundlessly to the horizon — and at the same moment another scene was superimposed, of a terrible storm, and black, raging waves, and a large tract of land that was torn off and submerged, or else flooded entirely, I don't know which. Many people were in the water, struggling and crying — and I saw a woman whom I thought was their Queen, who somehow encircled them with her arms, and the waves poured over her head as they all disappeared. I don't know what it meant, though in my inner consciousness I knew at the time. It reminded me when I awoke of the old stories of Atlantis, but although the dream appeared factual, the bit at the end was obviously symbolic.

"Another time I was in Tibet, again with the teacher, the same one it seemed. He was a Lama, and I was his pupil. We were in a large, low room in a mountain hermitage, and I remember a prayer-wheel stood nearby and I turned it; I had never heard of one as far as I'm aware, but learned of such things later, when I realised what I'd seen. I was receiving some specific instruction, and can only guess at its nature — though what I saw years later, presumably from the same life, makes me think it was to do with Tantric principles — not the debased version we hear about now, but in their original purity, that linked with the development of inner consciousness."

"What did you see, Kate?" I asked, deeply interested.

"Oh, a whole series of lives joined together like a circle — one of them as a female Lama — and the sum total of their digested experience seeking a point of contact or alignment with this one. I knew I had to prepare myself adequately before it could happen . . . but it's a long story, and best left for another time." She paused, looking rather apologetic, so I asked if she thought it likely that we connected with the same teaching master again and again.

"I really don't know," she replied. "To all intents and purposes yes, but this perhaps isn't relevant. The personality may differ, also the teaching method, according to the current culture of the time, but as Masters have no ego, and each of them is linked indissolubly with the Source, I suppose from our point of view it doesn't really matter. Even in this life, my past teacher and my present teacher, in essence, are one — and my experience

of commitment is identical. Yet I think there is a subtle difference in vibration — perhaps this relates to their own specific function. I honestly don't know!"

Soon we went indoors for tea, and Kate told me a little more about herself; that she had two children, a son and a daughter, and two small grandchildren whom she apparently doted on. "The baby is named Alexander, like you," she commented, as if the thought gave her pleasure. Her daughter, their mother, lived near Tunbridge Wells, and her son, who was the elder, had shared Kate's home until recently, but had now acquired a cottage on the Sussex coast. She said that both he and her son-in-law had made contact with Shah after reading his books.

"What happens regarding the Institute?" I asked, as she busied herself making tea. "Do you visit it regularly, or take courses there?"

"We don't do anything," she replied. "None of us are members. You can't just get in because you feel like it, you know. I applied, of course, and so did my son, quite independently and at different times, but we were both eventually referred to the Society for Sufi Studies, and are still, after many months, waiting some possible result. I don't even know what they do — it's impossible to find out anything about it."

"So at the moment there is still nothing!"

"Nothing."

This was very disappointing. What hope then was there for me? Kate sat watching me, the teapot poised in her hand. She shook her head, "Alex, I can almost see you thinking that I've waited long and eventless years, but truly, it isn't so. Many things have happened in that time — some *very* strange indeed, and of very real importance — and they all bear the imprint of the Teacher's hidden directive. You'll see this for yourself in due course. And remember what I told you — it's different for everyone. It doesn't mean that you will have to wait because I did!" I hoped not most fervently.

Later that evening I asked her out, and we drove to a quaintly pretty pub I had found once with Duff. She was delighted by the aged beams and inglenook fireplace, and sank back in her chair looking suddenly happy. There were pottery jugs of flowers on the oaken tables, which gleamed waxily under soft, shaded lights in the dim summer dusk. We talked on all manner of subjects, and Kate 'lit up' somehow, and exuded a joyous exuberance which I found endearing.

"We must do this again," I said, as we left. Then I drove her home, and made my way straight back to Norwich, with the same sense of relaxed satisfaction I had felt on the former occasion.

We went out several times together after that, and I took her to the sea one Sunday, and on another to my flat, which pleased her enormously.

But apart from odd snippets of information, I did not learn much else of her inner life and experience, and we simply became very good friends.

I realised though, that I found her increasingly attractive. In her summery dresses she was trim and shapely, and as a companion, almost invariably lively and vivacious. The age-gap between us appeared nonexistent, and she paddled on the beach, or exclaimed over flowers in the prolific Norwich garden rather like a little girl. Often I felt I was the elder, and we laughed many times over the intricacies of a relationship which evoked glimpses of so many past connections.

She seemed much happier too, than when I first met her, and the years eased away from her expressive face. I wondered dizzily more than once if she'd fallen in love with me, and was disturbingly aware of my own combustibility — but as she gave no obvious sign of this, decided I must be mistaken. Persistently though, the urge to kiss and embrace her impelled me to potent moves in this direction, but each time she steered me carefully into less charged waters, and I dared not push my chances too much and risk damaging our contact. Even so, by the end of five weeks I felt I knew Kate very well. And at this point, at the beginning of July, I received a reply to my letter, from Idries Shah.

It was written by his secretary, and suggested that I should attend the Institute on the afternoon of Saturday, July 14th, and join in their activities, and stay on to dinner in the evening, when Mr Shah would be present. I could be accommodated overnight if I wished, and leave on Sunday morning.

My satisfaction knew no bounds. All my fears had been ill-founded. I dashed off a note to Kate, and spent the day in such excellent spirits that various colleagues commented upon it, attributing it to the fact that I had been seen around with a woman. I let them think what they chose — though even this had its pleasures — as explanation was out of the question.

I acknowledged the letter, and said I would like to stay overnight, informing Dave that I had made an arrangement for that weekend. He said "Fine. I'll remember that," but asked no questions as he would have done formerly. On the surface everything between us was pleasant, but the old informality had gone. I knew he had written me off as a dedicated Company man, and would edge me out altogether if it could be done decently.

I was no longer pressurised as before; a new fellow, Marsh, had joined us, and a second appointment was in the pipeline. Old Bates still came in daily, looking as if he'd been given a new lease of life, and Phillips was out of hospital and almost fit for work again, though not for an overseas posting. I suspected he would eventually replace me, for work was his life, and

he was already hovering around the offices most days, desperate to find a new footing with the old now swept away. Some inner prompting still assured me I would soon be moving on, so I simply let things happen, and made no attempt to retrieve my former status.

My latest project was in Yorkshire, and I spent the week there, including the weekend, returning late on Sunday. It was vexing that when I most particularly wished to talk with Kate I could not get to her, but at length on Thursday I managed a day in the office, and I came away early and made for Cambridge.

She greeted me warmly, and we sat in the small sitting room with dutch roses and old-fashioned pinks wafting their perfume in all directions. "It's good to see you," I said, watching her face as she unwrapped the small gift I'd brought her — a Burmese Buddha with unusually delicate markings, that had caught my eye as I passed the window of a York antique shop. Her features lit up with pleasure. "Oh, Alex, it's beautiful!" she exclaimed, and seemed quite overcome that I had thought of her — a fact I found rather surprising.

We talked of my letter and the rapidly approaching visit to the Institute. I asked Kate if she thought this indicated I would be accepted as Shah's pupil.

"You are already his pupil," she said.

"You know quite well what I mean! My aim for some weeks now has been to enrol in his school and make it a literal fact."

She was silent and thoughtful for some minutes, and then she said quietly, "We neither of us know as yet, Alex, if the Institute really is a Sufi school."

This had not previously occurred to me, and furthermore, I thought firmly, I did not accept that it could be other than this. "If it were not," I replied, "Shah would hardly have spent so many years there."

"I have wondered," remarked Kate mildly, "if it's perhaps a kind of Sufi kindergarten — a place of preparation, where potential pupils can be sifted from those who are just using it for social purposes — or other less harmless reasons . . ."

"Kate, you can't be serious —"

"I am indeed. But of course I may be quite wrong. I mention it only to spare you possible disappointment."

I felt oddly perturbed. Kate was seldom negative and never so without reason, at least in my limited experience of her, but I could not concede her point, nor could I see why she should make it.

"Well, I expect I shall soon find out," I said.

"You may not," she commented perversely; "Shah doesn't make things simple, and as far as I can judge, if he wishes one to discern something, he

sees you find out for yourself through your own experience. He won't tell you."

"But *you* tried to join, didn't you!"

"Naturally. Like you, I wanted to be in his vicinity."

"Suppose you were given the chance now. Would you take it?"

"Of course I would."

"Don't you think this might change your viewpoint?"

"I doubt it; but I think it unlikely now that he would do this. And even if he did, it still wouldn't mean it was a school in the sense we define it."

I felt increasingly and unreasonably annoyed, and said rather sharply, "I find your logic difficult to follow, Kate. Why else should he involve one?"

"There can be many reasons. Whether he lets one in, or keeps one out, he intends us to learn something by it, and either way, situations and contacts are provided to fulfil our current need of certain experiences. As I told you before, he kept me out, but life was anything but static. If I had been allowed to involve myself with people I met at the Institute, I'm quite sure I wouldn't have connected with others in the way I was obliged to do alternatively."

"People like Adrian and Joanna?" We had never discussed them, as I invariably forgot to ask further, having too much else on my mind to talk about.

"Precisely. They, and others, would not have figured prominently in my life had there been regular contact with Shah and persons I would have met through him. However, I'm quite certain he intended me to do this, and he made sure I had no option."

"Can you tell me the reason? I've always found it strange to think of Joanna, Adrian and yourself talking for hours on end regularly — I simply can't imagine it, the mind boggles! Surely you didn't talk as you do to me?"

She laughed heartily — "Oh no, it wasn't like that at all; and we were certainly not in agreement, though superficially it may have seemed so at times. More often it was sheer slog — with Adrian's scholastic intellect doing its utmost to render me futile, in a gentlemanly way of course! Pure wit and sugared sarcasm, well laced with coffee and sandwiches, pseudo-friendship and tarot readings, but deadly nevertheless."

"You never cease to surprise me, Kate," I said with feeling — not sure if I should take her words too literally, "I had no idea it was like that — yet surely 'deadly' is too strong a word?"

Her eyes held a curious expression, as if uncertain how much she should enlarge on this. Finally she replied, "You should never underestimate the power of a trained mind, especially one laden with the magical

impressions of a long cycle of occult development.” There was a sudden sinking in my solar plexus, as if an impact had been registered of an adverse nature, though not adverse in itself — and for some reason I felt no desire at all to probe further. Instead I said coolly, “Were there many of you? And how is it you have never offered *me* a reading!”

I saw she noted my reaction. She held the Buddha gently cupped in her hand, and traced its features thoughtfully with her smallest finger. Without looking up at me she said, “There were about a dozen altogether, but not all at the same time. And the tarot was largely a focal point; it held their interest when it might otherwise have flagged, and also we all, myself included, learned much of the mechanics of psychism and prognostication. But the tarot isn’t to be played with, and was never meant anyway for mere fortune-telling, although it can prove frighteningly accurate, and incredibly sensitive in its response to certain persons who handle it frequently — and I don’t mean myself in this instance. In the end I induced this particular person, Sergei, to destroy the cards (which were my own) in Adrian’s presence, in order to impress him strongly that I was absolutely serious in saying he must cease to allow his life to be ruled by them. He’d created a pattern of subtle communication *through* the cards, which permitted an intervening activation not always good. He often mistook this as a form of guidance from a higher level of development. Psychics unfortunately tend to do this all the time when they meddle with outworn systems of divination! These systems, or what remains of them, weren’t intended originally for this purpose — they are the degeneration of earlier teaching forms, often contaminated by the thoughtforms of those who misused them. A psychic type can get into very deep waters unless genuinely, sincerely, and constantly aspirational, which acts ultimately as the only safeguard. Otherwise psychic dabbling is like entering a forest of serpents!”

She took a deep breath and smiled, her voice lifting to a lighter note — “Also, my dear Alex, I wouldn’t read the cards for you even if I had any. I resolved never to do so again; one can say far too much and upset people. And it isn’t necessary either. If one genuinely has the faculty of inner sight, it doesn’t require a pack of cards in order to operate!”

“But dammit, Kate — you never tell me *anything* precognitive, now do you!” I said jokingly, though it had often exasperated me that she knew various things she would not say. She sighed; “Maybe I don’t know anything to tell.”

“I can hardly believe that!”

“Why not? In general it’s true. I’ve had some extraordinary experiences in my life, many of them precognitive and accurate to an alarming degree, but I can’t produce them to order. I can’t ‘see’ all the time, though

impressions are constantly registered which I'm wary of translating into words. We all receive these impressions, there's nothing special about it, but some are more aware than others, and to be so is very much a double-edged sword, believe me. I wouldn't wish to interpret all I sense, even assuming I could. Things are difficult enough as it is. And whatever I 'know' about you Alex, I always say, though I grant you in an indirect form. If you don't perceive it and let it pass, you either don't really wish to know, or aren't yet ready to know, but you'll 'store' it anyway if it rings true inside you, and utilise it as a form of preparation. It works the same way for us all."

I was dumbfounded. She had never spoken like this before, with such firmness. I knew I was growing deeply attached to Kate, but frequently I found myself vexed with her, and now was a case in point. She got up immediately and went into the kitchen to make coffee, and on returning, smiled engagingly, and talked of something else. She was warm and charming and I was soon at my ease again, and reluctant to leave at the evenings end.

"Goodbye Kate," I said on the doorstep — "think of me Saturday won't you . . ."

"You know I will, you idiot," she replied, and placed a hand on each side of my face and said gently, "Bless you, Alex," and then was gone. It left a strange flavour to the evening which I could not pinpoint, but by the time I reached home again the peculiar sensation of inner disturbance had left me, and I felt pleasurable anticipation and a warm satisfaction once more.

Saturday dawned and I left early for Kent, keyed to a pitch of nervous intensity. The roads were busy but not too badly so, and I arrived safely on time. I left my car with others on the green, though I found later there was a carpark on the premises. I entered the courtyard immediately inside the gates as if I was passing through sacred portals, scarcely crediting that at last I was here.

It was very informal. People were milling around the beautifully converted barn and cottage buildings which formed the locale of the Institute, spilling over into surrounding lawns, outhouses and paddocks. A woman greeted me and introduced me to those who were nearest, and passed me over to an older man who led me on a kind of conducted tour of the property. His name was John, he told me, and he was a relative newcomer, having only visited for the past twelve months.

I learned there was a small distillery where wine was made, large tracts of cultivated garden to upkeep, poultry to feed, trees to fell, wood to chop, plus cooking and library work, which formed the basis of their practical tasks. The library incidently was excellent, and housed in what was once

the village school, on the garden's boundary. Everywhere was well-maintained, apparently by the students themselves. It was run just like a small community, though only at weekends.

I was shown my room, austere but pleasant in the larger cottage. John's was adjoining. I felt a deep exhilaration and sense of belonging. I could hardly wait to learn more.

But here I drew a curious blank. John knew little more than I, though he had been here on several occasions. Owing to the nature of his work, he said (he ran a small business), he had difficulty in getting away often, and was not always able to come when invited. I concealed my surprise. I knew quite well if I was 'invited' often, I would move heaven and earth to get here.

This weekend's work project was not the usual one, and consisted apparently of preparations for a Charity Fête and garden party to be held the following weekend. I understood it was organised by the students themselves, and part of the proceeds were to be allocated as funds for the Institute. It was to be a 'twenty-four hour party', and I was given a leaflet describing it. I was aware of powerful and immediate reactions within myself, and squashed them firmly, though it was abnormally difficult. Whoever had written the leaflet used jargon I associated with the 'hippy' types I had occasionally met up with. It did not fit in with my pre-conceived notions. I remembered several Sufi stories of similar 'shocks' administered to students to break down the rigidities of their conditioning, and assumed this was what it had met up with in myself.

Small tasks were given me — mainly cutting and pasting decorations; and in between fetching and carrying, teabreak, and generally assisting, I was able to talk briefly to others, and managed to ask several questions which to me were burningly important. And here too I made little headway. Either people did not know the answers, or they evaded giving them. A veil of secrecy lay over even the simplest of details. I concluded I was too obviously 'raw' to be confided in — yet delicately and in a surreptitious fashion, still I continued to probe whenever the opportunity was presented.

There was a large board covered with photographs depicting a previous party, with everyone dressed in 'Arabian Nights' type attire. This coming party was also a dress-up affair, with Time, past and future, as the theme. I thought, shamefully, it was all rather childish, and felt angry with myself for making criticisms.

I observed that the general noticeboard carried a small typed note concerning the Society for Sufi Studies — those members of the Institute wishing to join were invited to apply through the secretary, giving their interests and details of previous studies. I asked several persons if they had applied, and they said no, they thought it likely to be "too erudite," or

"too academic." I thought of Kate, who was anything but academic, and wondered how she would fare. Eventually I found a man who actually vouchsafed he had made an application, but many months ago now, and was still waiting a reply. Oddly enough, he was the least 'erudite' in type of all those spoken to, and my bewilderment increased. There seemed no one I could talk to in the way I talked to Kate. It must be, could only be, I thought, because I was a stranger.

At around 5.30, most work ceased, and people drifted away to change and prepare for dinner, which was at 8 p.m., but from 7.30 drinks were served, and John suggested I join him then.

I wilted rather in the confines of my room. Reluctant though I was to admit it, I was vaguely disappointed. This was of course unreasonable. I could not expect a readymade acceptance, and I was anyway a nondescript, over-serious and quite ordinary man — nothing special to look at or talk with, unlike some of the celebrities to whom I had been introduced.

At 7.30 I joined John in the small bar, and with a sudden heightening of awareness and tautening of muscles, I realised the tall, slim man who had entered just after me, was none other than the stranger from the London dining room — the Teacher himself. He was talking to another man, and several others followed, either listening or making comment. A rather dazzling young woman, blonde and attractive, who was standing near to John, called out to ask about his car, which had needed some attention, and to my chagrin, before I could glean the essence of the current conversation, it switched from all sides to the discussion of garage charges and car repairs. I felt amazed that those present could so readily waste precious time on such a mundane topic, which could, after all, be discussed with virtually any car owner, and certainly among themselves.

The bar was filling up now, and people overflowed into the adjoining conservatory and even the trestled dining hall. Others joined the conversation, and shortly different matters were likewise introduced — I remember jam-making was one, but throughout the twenty minutes or so before dinner, not one mentioned anything other than of a trivial nature, and the Teacher was not deferred to in any way, but simply conversed with in the usual manner. Small groups stood here and there intent on their own discussions, and John and another man were talking quite separately; the other man tried to include me, which was friendly of him, but I was concerned solely with hearing what Shah said, and strained my ears to hear the larger party whilst making somewhat monosyllabic replies.

I knew already that many persons present were academically highly qualified, even specialist, in their field, and some were otherwise eminent and successful in their own right, but this democratic equality with the living embodiment of a higher level of evolution was incredible to me. To

all intents and purposes, we might be any kind of social gathering, connected with any of a multitude of clubs or societies.

Every now and then I had the opportunity to observe discreetly this man who had been so predominantly in my thoughts. He was volatile, fluent and humorous, yet completely unassuming. There was an air about him of tempered tension, almost a quicksilver nervousness akin to that of a thoroughbred, yet superbly controlled. He was friendly towards everyone, and at the same time utterly impersonal. Once he glanced in my direction, and I felt sure he knew who I was, though no-one made any attempt to introduce me. It was all most strange, and I felt very hesitant and uncertain.

The gong sounded for dinner, and we moved into the dining hall. The Teacher had no special place, and sat in fact in a corner. I tried to obtain a seat where I could both see and hear him, but this was not possible, and I found myself some way down the parallel table on the opposite side of the room, a large vase of flowers obscuring any possible view. The meal was passed round plate by plate, and the Teacher fared indiscriminately with the rest. It was democracy in action, and must have been his wish.

Throughout dinner people talked together and the room was noisy — there was no chance at all of hearing Shah's conversation with those he sat among. It grew hotter and hotter, and someone opened a door, and the cool night air created a current of draught against my back. I thought resignedly my wretched constitution would be sure to develop a chill, and I had not even a crumb of consolation to make it worthwhile.

And then, just after nine, with the meal almost over, and the home-produced wine flowing copiously amongst most of those present — a sudden hush descended, and Shah's voice was heard clearly through the dwindling babble, which in moments ceased altogether — though his tones were not raised in the slightest, and he was still engaged in conversation with those nearest as before. I tried to see him, but was defeated by the vase, which it did not occur to anyone to move, and as a guest I did not like to press this. The conversation in the corner merged gradually into a discourse apparently designed for us all, and save for a few interruptions by those with comments or questions, he spoke to us solidly until almost eleven, without hesitation or reference to notes — a formidable achievement.

Early in this period he stood up, and continued his talk this way, so I saw him with clarity, and as time passed it seemed to me he wrung some substance from himself, and gave it freely to whoever could absorb it. As he spoke my awareness intensified, yet physically I grew increasingly exhausted despite my sustained interest — or perhaps because of it. I had been careful not to drink above a few sips of the wine, which was quite

heady stuff, wishing not to blur my own impressions, and my developing sensations could not therefore be attributed to this.

But what did he say? Try as I would later, I could only recall snippets, and this was largely because of the strange and seemingly unstructured narration, which turned in circles within itself, and could be likened (as it dawned upon me in the night) to a Sufi teaching story known as 'The Tale of Four Dervishes'. At one point he said he wished to help us, but what he had to give, we either did not want; or could not receive because of inadequate preparation, and we were not prepared to remedy this, to strip ourselves and start at the beginning, as most of us thought ourselves in the correct condition already. That we did not listen to him properly, though he repeated the same substance again and again — our minds were too full of other things, and must be emptied out before new seeds were planted, or they would grow the wrong way; but we would not part with our mental preoccupations which continually absorbed us, and there was no room for what he could offer us in their place.

This theme he wove in and out of his discourse, in varying guises. At times he was profoundly serious, then he broke up the created tension with clowning and mime. He commented on figureheads, religions and cults, made witty anecdotes — buffooned scholars, told stories against himself, described forms of psychism, debunked 'sacred cows' — gesticulated, mimicked, impersonated, lampooned. The man was a consummate actor, an absorbing speaker, cultured, thought provoking, utterly brilliant. I hung on to his words as the heat and the draught combined to increase my discomfort. My head soared dizzily, and my exhaustion grew beyond mere fatigue.

As the clock neared eleven and everyone looked the worst for wear for one reason or another, he concluded by saying that it was not necessary for certain students to attend the Institute, as they had no need of it. For them there were "other things". Abruptly he ceased speaking, said Goodnight, smiled wryly at us, and left.

Everyone began now to move also, with varying degrees of weariness. I noticed the talk was not discussed. I too left, in a dazed astonishment. I had felt, deeply and powerfully, that he spoke at the end directly to myself. Doubtless others did too, I do not know.

I lay awake a long time, so permeated with his emanation, it was as if I was part of him. When I slept, it was to dream of him, a blissful dream in which I became one of his retinue, a member of his staff. And then in the dream which followed, I entered another dimension, where time could be manipulated and turned back upon itself. I observed this happening, and some sequence in my future life. In the early hours I awoke, still suffused with his baraka — I thought in his idiom, and repeated his gestures and

even his facial movements — and behind, below, above and around me, were swathings of bliss.

By morning I had barely normalised. Without attempting conversation, I made my farewells and left for home. The Teacher had not spoken to me, nor acknowledged me in mundane terms. Yet I knew he had given me an inestimable gift, a part of his own substance. If others had shared this profound experience I did not know, for no-one spoke of it, and the persons I saw appeared normal enough, but presumably they would have thought that of me also, for I gave that impression.

En route to Norwich I called on Kate, and tried to repeat all that Shah had said to us, which I could not do now as it has faded from my mind. She watched me carefully and said softly, "You are not yourself, Alex — " and her eyes filled with tears. For a long time we sat silent in her room, in stillness and a deep companionship. At length I left her, kissing her gently as I said goodbye. This inward state remained until morning, and dissipated as I re-entered my workaday world.

Then came a reaction. On Tuesday Dave produced one of his periodic tantrums, and threw his weight around for reasons I thought trivial. I descended to a mood of darkness, a terrible ennui and distaste for all things pertaining to my daily life. I longed to retreat into my inner world and close the door. More even than this, I longed to be with Shah, to be part of *his* world, part of his school — or, failing all else, part of his Institute.

On Wednesday I phoned John, having remembered his surname and obtaining his number through Directory Enquiries, and asked if he thought it possible for me to attend the party with the rest.

"Surely," he said, "If you buy a ticket. Why not?"

"But I'm not yet a member. Ought I to get permission first from Mr Shah?" John thought this was crazy. It was, after all a charity fête. "Don't worry," he chided, "members can bring a friend. I'll get you a ticket and you can send me a cheque. Mind you, I may not be there myself, I'm not sure yet if I can find the time, but I'll be buying a ticket anyway."

It arrived on Friday morning, and despite Dave's rumbles of displeasure as he wished me elsewhere, on Saturday I again set off for Kent.

The weather was reasonable, not at its best for July, but quite warm and sunny, and the grounds of the Institute were transformed exotically with streamers and bunting and all manner of decoration. Two large marquees had been erected on the lawn, and these were vividly festooned with paper flowers, and in the large conservatory huge paper butterflies, exquisitely designed and painted, were spread across glass ceilings, and pinned elegantly against glass walls, amid a glowing variety of living and 'home-made' blooms.

The dining hall was now baronial, with skilfully cut panelling inset with

royal purple; the library, spacious and high-ceilinged, had been flawlessly draped with the same precision, overlaid with a motif which had taken hours upon patient hours to hand-cut, position and seal. Not one book was in sight. Balloons and streamers spanned the rafters in profusion, and the whole became a bazaar with stalls, games and produce, akin to an Aladdin's cave. There were fortune tellers beneath awnings, and a beauty parlour — and outside, spread near the lawn, a running buffet replete with a glut of cheeses, gherkins, shortbreads, strawberries, raspberries etc. etc. ad infinitum.

An atmosphere of gaiety prevailed, and people thronged colourfully everywhere, mostly in fancy-dress, and representing history through the ages. Some costumes were splendid and meticulously in period, some bizarre and dazzlingly original, ranging the gamut from caveman to spaceman, with even a quartet of Martians thrown in.

At such short notice I had done what was easiest, and emerged self-consciously as a Greek orator, draped ingeniously in a sheet, with a laurel wreath constructed painstakingly from cuttings filched from the mini-shrubbery outside Dave's offices.

It is not my intention to describe in any detail the excellence and forethought and sheer hard work that went into everything — the food alone was a perpetual banquet, continually available, and crowned by a dinner befitting the magnificence of the baronial hall it was served from; it is sufficient to state it was an event that succeeded, grandly and gloriously, in the purposes for which it was originally ordained.

For myself, it was at first a matter of mild enjoyment; I wandered the side-stalls and attended the auction — watched the stageshow and later, the dancing; ate lunch and dinner; helped out where possible — talked, laughed, and observed. And all the time my eyes sought the Teacher, who appeared early on with his family, and circulated among the myriad of guests, disappearing and reappearing, conversing with all and sundry, amiably, humorously or seriously as the case might be, with the robe of his country worn casually over his western attire.

But as the day wore on I felt more and more alone, and increasingly disheartened, and within me I experienced the beginnings of a kind of grieving, though I could not fathom why.

Late in the evening, with coloured lights illumining the courtyards, I sat at one of the café tables to watch the advertised cabaret. There were a variety of things to do, but people had by now settled in pairs or small groups, and I seemed an outsider — this therefore was the simplest course to take. In the dimness I noticed that Shah, too, had entered the roped-off area, which was set out like a continental wine garden. He sat alone, on the edge of the ballooned and streamered recess around the impromptu

stage, and next to a vacant chair. For a wild moment I thought of joining him, but simultaneously the vivacious blonde young woman noted before, who apparently knew him well, crossed the courtyard and sat beside him as the cabaret commenced.

I suddenly felt appallingly drained and tired; and then, without forewarning, I was plunged into thoughts of Sophie, and days long gone when I had loved, and been loved, and nostalgia swept unbearably through me, leaving in its wake an increasing and desolate loneliness. It was so distressing I no longer wished to stay, or listen, though I recognised even through my wretchedness that all my longings were misplaced. I knew that had I been drawn into Shah's orbit at any time throughout the day, in the kind of friendship enjoyed by his present companion and so many others, my feelings now would not have been the same. I would have experienced hope and expectancy. Instead of which, though only a few yards were between us, I felt further from him than ever before.

Weary beyond words, I went at length through the ropes and into the drive, then out of the gates to the green which was strewn with cars. Most of them were parked for the night, and here and there stood a caravan or tent. I threaded my way through the darkness, found my own car, and lay on the back seat — covering myself with the blankets I had mercifully remembered to bring, as there were no spare rooms this time of course. All were full to overflowing, or would be in the early hours. The band still played for late dancers, and I knew that films and an open-air barbeque would continue all night. I tried to sleep, but tired out though I was, I could not rest.

It was very chilly, and at last, long after the band had given up and gone home, I dozed stiffly and fitfully, the strange emptiness and aloneness within me expanding and reaching out in anguish, seemingly through an infinitude of space. I sought my source, and strained consciously on the borderline of sleep to find it, but there was no baraka now to give me wings, and emerging again to the wakeful night I cried like a child. How absurd it was, in the midst of festivity, on the edge of the laughter that wafted on the breeze, and the fairy lights, and the sounds of human frivolity. Absurder still that I lay in easy reach of the man who could open the door, and grant me the key to eternity; but the door was barred, and I was outside still, and in my heart I knew it.

Morning brought me no increase of spirit, though I put a good face on it, and smiled and joked sleepily with the rest. Breakfast was a prolonged and cheerful affair, and those present seemed little the worse for lack of rest. The main event before lunch was an impromptu stage show, in which any volunteer could take part, and there seemed no shortage of willing talent, for the same individuals performed again and again. Some

of the things they did, I confess, I did not find funny. But doubtless I was affected by my own mood, an offshoot of the grief that lay submerged, like an iceberg, beneath the surface of my consciousness.

Then came lunch, and people began to disperse, many having long distances like myself to cover before reaching home. I took a last look round, and was about to leave also, feeling rather forlorn; the weekend had not yielded what I came for, and there was a curious sense of incompleteness.

The crowd thinned rapidly, and a constant procession of cars moved along the drive and away. I glanced in the kitchen to thank the chef and helpers for their gargantuan effort. It was empty, and a mountain of unwashed crockery stood patiently awaiting potential volunteers, who, ignorant of the task like myself, were busily making their departures. I thought I ought at least to offer — the core of workers were quite obviously worn-out even to my self-centred eye.

I approached one of the women who had assisted non-stop, but she thanked me and said it could all wait until tomorrow, when others had already arranged to clear up. Rather thankfully I moved away. And then I heard drumming — the plaintive wail of a pipe, and sweet strains of music, reminding me instantly of my days in the East. Puzzled, I turned and followed its direction, and there on the lawn sat a small group of Arab musicians, surrounded by the remnant handful of guests who had not yet left. Three in number, they wore traditional dress, and played traditional instruments — the trio consisting of father, son and grandson as I soon learned. Crosslegged nearby sat Shah, wearing again his emerald robe, with a loose-wound turban about his head.

Those present had collected themselves in a circle, and in the centre three very different girls danced Turkish fashion, with swaying hips and clapping hands, and the drums produced an ancient exotic rhythm that ran through the veins like throbbing fire. It was irresistible. I joined the bystanders, who gradually settled themselves in seated postures on the grass. Soon they requested music they could sing to, and the Arabs played them Western tunes from many years back, still known to most of us, though some were from the war and others yet older folk-songs. It was all nostalgic, haunting and emotional, and evoked a powerful atmosphere.

Slowly I edged closer to Shah, and when a small party reluctantly left, found myself only a few feet away from him, and directly in line with the musicians. The older man, the grandfather, repeatedly gazed at him, and I saw in his eyes a devotional reverence that unfroze, with sudden pain, the barren wilderness inside me.

The music stopped; someone brought tea and lemonade for the players, and the singers went off in search of their own. The older man, after the briefest pause, played on as he chose, and from the melodeon-type

instrument came strains that must have echoed down the ages. The fine old voice rose suddenly in his own tongue, and poured from some hidden depth a range of emotion alien to our adolescent West — a song of yearning and homage. He looked at Shah with his soul in his eyes, and, momentarily overcome, reached out to touch him. I was deeply moved, and more so by Shah's response, for he too, stretched out his hand to clasp the other's, and uttered an unknown, resonant sound in his throat, that reverberated in the core of me.

It was like a return to the past — an imaged recollection of old, weathered stones and sunlit walls, a shaded garden — the delicately timbred voice raised in a passionate outpouring of devotion — and again the Sufi, surrounded by his own. Stinging, unshed tears pressed in my eyes, and I saw them brimming, unconcealed, in those of the musician. It was a moment of pure beauty, evocative, jewel-like; with a quality of intensity outside my previous experience. Yet glancing around soon after — I was immediately aware that few, if any, had shared it.

Then came more music from the insistent drums and wailing flute. Shah took a tambour and joined in, and I was conscious that he effected something through this media, for the attention of the group became concentrated, and a rising ecstasy soared through me, like a winging bird. After a short while he ceased — the others continuing without him, but the impetus rapidly waned, as if something had been withdrawn.

Those on the lawn began dispersing now, quite swiftly, in twos and threes, and soon Shah too, stood up, and walked away from us. The party was over, and I slipped off with the rest, still lit inside but not ostensibly. Having forgotten how tired I was, I made good headway, but two hours later fatigue crept upon me unawares, and I longed suddenly for my bed.

It was too late by the time I passed Cambridge to detour and call on Kate, and well past midnight when I entered the flat. I set the alarm knowing well in my present exhaustion my body would crave sleep, and it would not improve Dave's irascibility if I arrived late again.

I drifted off instantly, but the drumming was still with me, and seemed to resound through me all night long. I awoke to the insistent shrilling of the bell, struggling to recall what I had dreamed the moment before, but all I could remember was Kate crying, and the smiling face of Joanna in a hazy blur — then the voice of the Teacher, explaining patiently a situation I could not understand.

Feeling rather concerned about Kate as a consequence, I called on her as soon as I could. She embraced me warmly, and soon informed me she was shortly to spend a fortnight away, visiting both her son and her daughter. I watched her carefully, but she was lively and affectionate and there was no sign of anything wrong. Thus reassured, I put the dream from my mind.

She listened with deep interest to my story of the party. I told her I was sorry not to have asked her along too, but there hadn't been time, or the possibility of a ticket as far as I knew. Her face was immediately serious. "But I wouldn't have gone anyway," she said.

I stretched out my legs and relaxed in the biggest armchair, looking at her enquiringly.

"It didn't come my way as it did yours. I think it was right for you to go, but for me it would have been 'pushing in' somehow. It's not yet my time."

"How can you be so sure, Kate?" She sat very still, and looked beseechingly at me, reluctant to be drawn.

"It's just an awareness. I've waited so long, and I've always known I had to wait. Now I'm absolutely certain the waiting's nearly over. But not quite."

I laughed at her emphatic expression, her 'schoolmarm' look as I called it, which appeared whenever she was deeply in earnest.

"What do you expect to happen? Have you any clear idea? Or do you simply hope for the odd meeting — personal contact I mean, in London or Kent?"

"That would be no different to the Institute," she said gravely. "What I've seen isn't like that at all."

"My dear, what *have* you seen? Why don't you ever say?" This had been a quietly vexed point between us in the past — Kate invariably side-tracked me on the subject, and looked as if she intended this now. I held her eyes insistently with mine, and would not let her look away. I was smiling, but I felt she knew that this time I would not give up so easily. She said hesitantly, "What I've seen is rather like a blueprint, Alex — the impress into matter of a definitely conceived intervention . . . one affecting many lives . . ."

"An intervention by whom, Kate?"

"A higher form of intelligence," she said, looking at me rather anxiously — "an evolved Entity or Being . . . or a group of Beings, far ahead of mankind in an evolutionary sense — part of the Hierarchy governing the future of the planet —"

An overwhelming feeling of surprise swept over me, that Kate — *my* Kate, intuitive though she was, should make such an assertion, and apparently mean it as a solid fact of existence.

"Go on," I prompted.

"There seems to be a framework — a structure . . . a whole new design for life and inner development . . . moving into manifestation immediately ahead of us in time . . . filtering already through an intermediary strata to specially selected points. Every detail pre-planned; originating from above

to below . . . not in linear time at all . . . thus superseding our planetary laws of cause and effect. And absolutely nothing can stop it . . . it's already *there*, out of range of our vision, but as real and solid as life itself. How it will manifest, I can only surmise . . . my conscious mind has nothing similar to equate it with — my brain can only translate impressions of possibilities and approximations, and even so these may be wide of the mark . . . but it brings spiritual opportunity, and *work* — at a certain time, in a certain place, for certain people — and this is duplicated all over the earth. I'm afraid I'm not able to be more specific," she concluded, almost with a note of apology in her voice. I tried to make sense of what she'd said.

"I think I can grasp what you mean," I proffered, after a few minutes reflection, "but could you give me some approximations, Kate, just as an outline? It would help make a clearer picture."

"I hate doing that, Alex — it can be so misleading."

"Please try!" I smiled at her reassuringly, "I promise I'll consider it purely hypothetical!"

She laughed, "You're twisting my arm again!"

"Rubbish! Please Kate! Try to give me some idea!"

She pressed her hands together as she thought about it, in the rather nervous and youthful manner I found so endearing, then she suddenly relaxed and said quietly, "Several times now — perhaps half-a-dozen — I've seen the same theme in essence, yet each time my brain translates it rather differently, so you must appreciate how difficult it is to communicate it with any clarity. Generally speaking though, it appears that the earth's layer of living beings — is undergoing a kind of penetration of cosmic material, which is quite *deliberate* on the part of a higher agency — a governing force which, as I understand it, controls the ultimate destiny of the earth and mankind. Its intention is to produce a *finer* and more complex response, resulting eventually in a specific development — the end product of which is already in prototype."

"You mean a general quickening!" I leaned towards her, my senses suddenly alert.

"Something on those lines perhaps — but it seems more than that. When we say quickening, we usually mean a speeding-up of natural development, and the cosmic inflow which regulates *that* is always with us, and can be utilised by the individual at a certain stage anyway. But this doesn't simply relate to the individual at all — it's universal — *everything* is affected, *all* organic life! A new force, or influence, is reaching us — *coded* to produce precise results that will *supersede* the old modes of development — almost a forced process which will have effects unique in world history as we know it." Her voice tailed off, as if she expected me to

repudiate what she had tried to convey. My head felt extraordinarily light as I digested this.

"Kate — are you saying new forms of evolution will appear?"

"No, not at all. I don't think the concern is with form as such. Rather with an inner process which on this planet hasn't developed correctly — something is out of alignment — and remember I may be using all the wrong terms here — but anyway the process is not as it should be, and is being brought into balance by a direct act of intervention. Everything useless and inhibiting to this process will be swept away . . ."

I had a swift mental impression of wholesale chaos, and a choked-up bank of obsolete debris, which I quickly ejected from my mind. I said quietly, "It all sounds alarmingly clinical." Kate stared at me with a kind of wonder, that I could fail so utterly to comprehend.

"Not so — that's only one angle, seen with an entirely human eye; what I perceived in this state — and I was completely conscious, Alex, yet at the same time almost out of my body — was totally benign and exquisitely beautiful! It sought to release planetary life from its self-created bondage. This tremendous inflow of cosmic light poured over everything — suffused the entire planet and penetrated every form of life upon it. Its effect was regenerative and restorative; it re-established an alignment with its own source of being . . ."

I glimpsed another picture, from a different angle, which was awesome in its magnitude. "How wonderful, Kate," I said softly — "I can almost see it as you speak . . ."

Her eyes sought mine, dark and earnest. "Do you really see it? What strikes you most impactively?"

"A concept of harmony and beauty — like the onset of the golden age prophesied down the ages —"

"That may well be the long-term effect — but it can't come first," she replied rather sadly, "it can't happen easily, though the end result's pre-ordained and quite inevitable. A stepping-up of transformative force *must* cause resistance . . . and in this respect, the animal kingdom and all natural life will fare much better than humanity — having followed its own instinctive laws without deviation. But *we've* broken *all* the laws, and built up terrible crystallisations of unnecessary greed, cruelty and self-centredness. A certain amount was inevitable, but gross depravity is entirely man-made and man-perpetuated, leading to widescale degeneration of the species as a media for conscious development. It didn't have to happen that way — there was a choice, and free-will was given to each one of us — but the consequence is a vast mountain of distorted growth, like a cancer, in mankind's causative patterns, which influences and affects incoming souls to the point where it *has* to be dealt with."

"I see what you're driving at, but doesn't that rather nullify the principle of free-will?"

"We can't just glibly say these things. Free-will exists for everyone, not just the inherently perverted — yet it is these, through their ambition and power, that have set the tone for the rest by the way they've shaped our civilisations. Those who *would* correctly orientate themselves have less and less opportunity, particularly in the West, where childhood is now so unnaturally conditioned, it renders later possibilities almost nil. It seemed to me, and remember I can only register according to my own capacity, that the most significant thing I saw, was in effect a subtle kind of surgery . . . the cutting away and removal of malformations on an enormous scale, which will work out pretty drastically in world events. But the coded vibration already beginning to infiltrate, will nullify the residual deviations, and activate a new order of existence . . . a more natural way of life, with the finer aspects of human nature predominant . . . creating fresh cultures, where genuine schools will establish vital possibilities for the evolution of consciousness.

"I actually saw the descent of such schools into manifestation — they link with the previous history of the earth, long lost to us now, when Beings of a finer development incarnated and were acknowledged for what they were — racial forerunners and teachers. What *we*, personally, wait for, Alex, and call 'school', is just the beginning. It will take a long time for the whole operation to come fully into effect. You can equate it with a bulb, a shoot, a bud, a flower; but its initial *insertion*, its 'planting', is a cosmic event, requiring infinite care and preparation on the part of those enlightened lives that are bringing it to birth. They disseminate, in relevant form to existing circumstance, an organic nutrient the Sufis call *baraka*, which, correctly absorbed, makes us grow — or more specifically, develop an inner organ of consciousness. You already know this! But how many in our present civilisation are aware of it? How many know what life on earth is *for*? We've forgotten as a race the very meaning of our own existence."

These were stupendous thoughts — yet I felt they rang true in essence. I asked Kate if she considered her earlier assertion to mean the actual destruction or invalidation of world karma, but she replied it didn't work this way — everything followed its own laws which could be superseded, but not cancelled; therefore, whatever is set in motion must work to its inevitable conclusion according to law. But a *higher* law can intervene and move these units round a bit, rearrange them rather differently, so that instead of tomorrow reaping a painful consequence, it is deferred until later, when one could deal with it more ably, perhaps even transmute it entirely with the greater strength acquired in the meantime! Or a

pleasurable sequence may likewise be deferred, to prevent satiety and heedlessness, and suffering brought forward instead to create strength and inner fortitude — but neither effect is rendered obsolete or destroyed. The laws themselves are not interfered with, and absorption plus transmutation by a stronger principle, appears the only way out of experiencing one's own 'effects' — likewise the world's.

Our free-will, according to Kate, lies solely in our selection of causes — we can be cruel or kind, hostile or friendly, generous or mean, and our 'effects' are born from this — the pattern of some lives reveals it, but this is an over-simplification, and we neither see nor acknowledge in the West the pattern a child is born with, preferring to believe it has no pattern at all save in its genes.

"How then, Kate," I said, "is this planetary 'cancer' dealt with?"

She gave me a wry look, and laughed. "That's a big question — and I don't really think I can tackle it now — even assuming I've got the right answer, but everything that happens in this world exists already, in potential, on a subtle level — which is why we can glimpse some happenings in advance, precognitively. Time is a dimension with many gradients, and in some causative strata, it has *already* occurred, and *already* been dealt with — but the actual physical manifestation is yet to come, and is still moving through time towards us. The tension in national events begins to reflect it, and everywhere, in every aspect of life, you can see its foreshadowing.

"The incoming light I spoke of, may relate also to an influx of beings of a higher development than man, born into human bodies for preordained reasons — one of which perhaps is to 'burn up' or transmute at a vastly higher rate the 'effects' created by the mass of men, which obstruct their own progression towards their true destiny. Another factor may be that those same individuals possess the power of germination — they could constitute a leaven amongst us, and their interleaving in our lives could cause our own small sparks of immortality to quicken. It's my personal belief that many are amongst us now . . ." She stopped, and suddenly looked exhausted, and I realised the conversation must have placed quite a strain on her, and felt concerned for not noticing this.

I caught her eye, and beamed magnanimously "How about tea?" I said, "And Kate, my dear, I'll actually make it for you!"

I was extremely curious about Kate's experience — the how, when and where of it, but felt that, at least for the time being, I should probe no more; and we talked and joked together in our usual fashion. I told her I had been thinking of repeating my last year's vacation in Scotland, which had been quite enjoyable and spent largely with Rupert, my old friend from schooldays. "How about joining me, Kate?" I suggested, "We could tour Scotland together and you would enjoy it immensely." I knew she

had never been there, in fact, had hardly been anywhere at all.

"Oh, I'd love to!" Her reply was spontaneous, but then she hesitated, thought a bit, and wavered.

"What's the problem? You know quite well that you would like to go! I'm not making an improper suggestion if that's what you're thinking!" I could not but laugh at her expression, which I judged to be pure 'maiden aunt' — though in Kate it manifested more as 'timid young girl' despite her years.

"I wasn't foolish enough to think that," she said, looking disconcerted.

"What's foolish about it?" I was enjoying the flush creeping over her face. "It's not a bad idea, come to think of it." It was obvious I had thrown her into confusion, so I returned to my sober mien, and asked her again. She still hedged, and I realised suddenly she thought I'd invited her out of kindness. "Kate! you're an absolute idiot! How a perceptive person like you can be so blind is beyond me. Don't you understand I *want* you to be with me? I would enjoy your company far more than anyone else I know. I thought you had grasped that at least!"

She looked pleased, though still hesitant, but after a little more persuasion, said she would come. "Be it upon your own head!" she said, and then put on a quite ridiculously flowery hat with a wide, floppy brim (which suited her superbly), and I took her out to dinner.

It had been my intention to return yet more intensively to my studies, and having purchased Shah's latest book, 'A Perfumed Scorpion' in May, I set about reading it through for the second time. All the rest I had read and reread again and again, and was beginning to feel a definite effect from continued exposure to Sufi methods. This is difficult to describe with any accuracy, for I had become aware of an activation when the books were still quite new to me. It took the form of vivid dreams and impressions, which led to a whole new range of insights into the mechanics of my inner workings and motivation, and also threw light on the significance of many past events in my life.

Increasingly now I glimpsed my own psychology — my mental blocks, conditioning, rigidities and limitations, and became uncomfortably convinced that as a product I was incomplete — virtually 'half-finished'. A remarkable feature of Shah's work was the way each fresh reading unlocked further perceptions, and I saw and understood what had formerly remained obscure, or been missed altogether. The books became gradually 'alive' to me, the material they contained appeared organic in some extraordinary manner, for as one digested it mentally, it changed in character and seemingly encouraged an inner growth which produced both psychic and occult side-effects. More important by far than any of these, however, was the increasing self-knowledge that expanded into

awareness of an entirely new strata of existence; as if one had lived in another country long ago and forgotten it, but now re-entered its gates, and gradually found familiar landmarks unexpectedly amidst its strangeness.

It was at this period that I realised how radically I had begun to change. Most aspects denoting this were small, infinitesimal in some cases, yet at rare moments I could observe them and knew positively they were there. Incredibly, too, was a major change, which became clearer to me as the months progressed. I knew I was reorienting myself, and all that was useful to my purpose was drawing itself together in one place, creating a new facet to my personality that slowly brought my weaknesses under control. All that was superfluous to my essential spiritual need was gradually stripped away, and increasingly a one-pointed effortless desire grew in me, with Shah its focal point. A desire to be with him, and share the companionship, the tuition, and the baraka he bestowed — became my pivotal aim.

I had been studying consistently for almost fifteen months, and now, as I say, after my Institute visit, I intended a further effort, more powerful and concerted than before, for my mind was no longer clouded by my former grief over Sophie, and even my bodily ailments were quiescent. I arranged with Dave to have less time away, and fewer hours of worklife altogether. He was cool about it, but I was no longer concerned. I still worked hard and well — he had no cause for complaint, though he knew almost as well as I that my enthusiasm would never again be the same.

And having made all the conditions conducive to study — I met with shock No. 1 — I could not read for any length of time successfully. My mind was saturated, and would hold no more. I forced myself, and this, without doubt, produced effect, yet it was a limited one. I could not continue to do this beneficially. An hour was enough, and the long evenings I had prepared for this purpose could not be utilised. Frustrated, angry and disturbed I mused upon it, but to no purpose. I did not know why I had come to a full stop. I only knew my longing and dissatisfaction grew, until it permeated both day and night.

Kate was now away, and I could find no reassurance — nor did I like to write of this and trouble her. Throughout the two weeks of her absence I dwelt in wretchedness, and resolved eventually to write once more to Shah. The decision made, I proceeded to get down to it, but my efforts to express myself were so inadequate, I gave up all attempts to write of my inner lethargy, and recounted instead the experiences connected with my visits to the Institute.

The climate changed; Kate returned, cheerful and blooming and all set to plan our Scottish tour. Matthew came back bounding with energy,

ideas and enthusiasm, and Dave threw off ten years and took on the air of a young man. I alone of all my acquaintance could not participate with zeal in whatever was placed before me.

Kate was sympathetic and said she had herself experienced this, and it would pass, though maybe not immediately — or else it could come and go over quite a long period — but everyone was different, and perhaps I would be ‘let off the hook’ much sooner than she had been.

We were now into late August, and daily I waited the post in hope of a speedy reply to my letter. What I expected I hardly knew — though the hope burned ever brightly of a personal interview leading to admission to the Institute. So far I hadn’t asked outright if I might join, not wishing to be precipitate, yet without doubt, reading between the lines, it was obvious this was my desire.

Days passed and my vacation loomed. It was arranged for the last fortnight of September, and two days beforehand, and exactly four weeks from writing, something occurred which caused me to think very deeply.

I was visiting a client in St Alban’s in connection with a proposed small hotel, when whom should I run into in the car park but John — he too was in the city on business, and both being free for lunch, we agreed to meet later for a talk. The mornings affairs went smoothly, and I arrived on time at the quiet country pub on the outskirts which John frequented when in St Alban’s, and sat down a few minutes to wait.

He came quite soon, in company with another man around my own age, whom he introduced as Mark B., a fellow member of the I.C.R., though like John, he hadn’t been able to attend the party. John said he’d rung him on the offchance as his office was in the city, to see if he could join us. I was extremely pleased; this appeared a golden opportunity to obtain more information.

We ordered lunch, and before long, in response to their queries, I was telling them of my planned course of studies, and the amount I’d got through in the past year — my enthusiasm quite running away with me. I noted they looked uncomfortable, and wondered if I had made a blunder. “I realise it’s not the same as studying under Shah personally,” I said, somewhat apologetically — “I’ve simply done what the books suggest, read and reread, in order of sequence — that is, I assume, of publication? In an attempt at saturation, which is reiterated as necessary. You have the advantage of me here. Can you tell me anything of your own courses?”

A look passed between them, difficult to translate.

“We have no set courses,” Mark replied — “Although, of course, that may not apply to everyone. We just go along to the Institute when we’re able or when invited, and take part in the current work project. Oh, and try to read Shah’s books as they come out.”

“Try to read them?”

"My dear chap," John interposed mildly, "in business on one's own, one cannot always command the time!"

"But presumably their study is considered essential?"

"Well yes," said Mark, "I suppose it is — but some people have more time than others as John points out. Several of the women I believe have read them over and over — though I for one find this very hard going. It becomes rather monotonous reading the same book time after time. The last three I've read once apiece, slowly, so that I can absorb them."

John nodded as if this applied to him also. "The importance," he emphasised, "is in the connection — the Institute is primarily an educational establishment, and its Director being a Sufi gives it a certain slant. But you don't actually have to be a Sufi to become a member you know."

I said this seemed reasonable enough, as any religious or philosophical organisation did not exist solely for the 'converted', but also those who might later accept their principles.

"How did you join?" I asked John.

"I simply wrote to the Secretary and was invited to visit."

"Not to Shah?"

"Oh, no, that's not necessary. And if one wishes to attend between invitations, you write to the office and ask if there's a vacancy — not to Shah personally!" He smiled at me benevolently.

I looked at Mark enquiringly. He responded obligingly; "I *did* write to Shah, several times, and received courteous replies. And then one day he suggested I apply to join the Institute, and I've been attending fairly frequently ever since."

I observed him intently.

"How frequently, if you don't mind my asking?" Mark was amused. "About every two months — sometimes less." John nodded again, "Yes, about the same for me — only sometimes I have to miss out through heavy commitments."

"Also," interjected Mark, "we family men have our wives to consider — mine, for instance, is a Catholic, and not at all happy about the Institute. She won't come with me, so I have to go alone when it's least disruptive to my homelife."

"A very valid point," John agreed, "though I'm more fortunate in this respect. My wife has no objection as long as I don't make a thing of it."

I felt nonplussed. I wasn't getting far at all. Their remarks were reasoned and sensible by normal standards. They fulfilled their own needs without upsetting their family lives or business arrangements. But I was quite sure that had I still been with Sophie, my studies alone would have caused havoc, without even considering my changed attitudes and focussed attention. Somewhat deflated I asked impulsively and unwisely if

Shah often appeared in their dreams.

"Dreams?" said John, "do *you* dream of him then?"

"Why yes, I have done, several times — and a friend of mine has very frequently, though she isn't connected with the Institute at all." John looked at Mark. "I've never heard of it before," he replied. "Nor I," murmured Mark, eyeing me oddly. Lord, I thought, this fellow thinks I'm a queer fish.

John glanced casually at the wine-list, but when he looked up his eyes were purposeful. "Shah states *emphatically* he isn't a guru, and he strongly discourages any kind of personality-cult." There was a certain disapproval in his tone. I replied that I knew very little of Shah's personality, and what I was referring to was not the personality as such anyway. "Surely you've read Ouspensky's book, 'In Search of the Miraculous'?" I said.

Both nodded affirmatively. "I was a member of an Ouspensky group for some years," John asserted — "that's how I came to hear of Shah in the first place." I realised the point had been side-tracked, but let it pass.

"And you?" I queried, looking at Mark, who said promptly that his interest was philosophy, but he had also studied mysticism, Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gita — and found Arberry's books very impressive, particularly his work on Rumi . . .

We launched into an interesting but largely academic discussion where we had much ground in common, and well after each of us should have been elsewhere, parted on good terms. I felt, however, our friendship was only superficial. They would not forget my peculiarities, and I sensed a gulf stretch yawningly between us. Why, oh why, I thought, as I went off to inspect the hotel site, cannot I talk with them as easily as with Kate? Why do they react so? And they *do* react, I know I'm not imagining it. But as yet I could find no answer.

That night I dreamed clearly and vividly of Shah. The dream faded rapidly, but before it did so I grasped its rudiments and sat up in bed muted with sleep, hastily making notes in order not to lose it entirely.

In the dream I was with a large group of people seeking admission to a Sufi school. Shah was selecting those suitable for inclusion, which involved a specific process in the course of which each one was 'emptied out'. This was followed by a brilliantly conceived series of situations wherein the candidate was compelled to 'ring true' — demonstrate their inner worth, or 'sound' their particular level of evolution. There was no possibility of deceit or evasion; things were so arranged, one could not possibly know either what was correct, or what was expected of one, in advance. Some appeared to avoid this confrontation, but it could not continue indefinitely, and I saw that Shah was fully aware of such attempted duplicity, appearing even to go along with it — but that he skilfully

exposed that individual when least expected.

When I awoke, it was with the distinct awareness that he had prepared something for me, and this 'something' would have to be undergone before I could go any further. It was in some way a necessity to me, and constituted one aspect of my own probation. In a hidden part of my awareness I knew what it was, but a veil or barrier obscured it. For a few minutes I struggled to remember, without result, and I had to accept that this was intentional, and I must remain in ignorance until its 'time'.

I wondered if the dream presaged a reply to my letter, but was obliged to concede it was now most unlikely. As the ancients say, 'no answer is itself an answer', and probe though I would I could not discern what its meaning was for me.

At last came the Saturday of our departure. I collected Kate and her baggage, and we set off in good spirits. My mood of despondency and inner pain had passed; it did so quite suddenly on the day following my dream, and all was as before. Kate's misgivings over joining me were soon proved unfounded. Long hours of close contact placed no strain on our friendship; it ripened and deepened, and the whole fortnight was a sheer delight.

The weather was variable but did not trouble us, and in rain or sunshine we absorbed the scenery in great draughts of equal appreciation. Kate loved the highlands, and the great lochs held her spellbound. We kept to the quieter roads and took our time, meandering gently through pretty villages, and hugging the coast for miles. We sought out the highland streams and crofters cottages, and watched the patient skill of time-worn crafts.

In some ways it was like a journey into the past, for the ancient castles and rugged moors are still inviolate, and appear today much as they have done for centuries. In the warm midday sun we picniced in the pungent heather, and when soft drizzle fell, we found a tearoom or a pub. Among such breathtaking loveliness, it was easy to unwind and relax, and Kate and I found a rare companionship that was as at home in silence and reflection, as in hilarity and long bouts of conversation. In Inverness we called on Rupert, and had dinner with his family, talking late and staying overnight. And all the time there was a pleasurable intimacy — we sang together as we climbed the hills, held hands, and made idiotic jokes.

We even danced. There was one hotel with a ballroom, and Kate suddenly blossomed. She hadn't danced since she was nineteen and first married, she said, and though I'm not much of a dancer, we glided like swans on the peerless floor. It was utterly blissful. We stayed three days, and Kate glowed with happiness; she called it her 'Indian Summer', and in the soft-lit ballroom I could see the girl she had been, and knew that I

loved her. And each night I kissed her as if we were old-fashioned lovers, and we went to our separate rooms. It held a kind of enchantment that made me realise how much the young of today are missing.

Yet though we talked endlessly on every conceivable subject, we both held back on our private lives as if the years of marriage had not been. And with few exceptions I learned little more of her inner perceptions. We each projected an aspect of ourselves, I realised later, that had been submerged by those with whom we had shared our lives. We became, in effect, the personalities we might have been had there not been restrictions, and the fruit was very, very sweet, and blended well.

Our last evening came all too soon. It was cool, and we sat by a huge log fire in an old stone inn, happy and at ease. "Are you ready to go home now Kate?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"It's been so lovely, Alex — the happiest time I've ever had. I cannot thank you enough for bringing me."

"*Thank* me! Kate, you're an idiot, I've loved it too, every minute of it. Do you suppose I could say that if I'd come on my own?"

"I suppose not, but — please don't be offended Alex, it's still hard for me to believe you wouldn't have been happier with someone like Sophie . . . or even with Sophie herself."

My muscles tautened. This was the first time she had ever mentioned Sophie of her own accord, and it wasn't like her at all.

"My dear, " I replied, "it's all in the past now, and I rarely think of her."

"But you loved her very much."

"I did indeed, but I realise now that the woman I thought she was simply didn't exist; I was projecting a dream."

"Isn't that what we all do? If we saw clearly at the start, would we have done what we did? But I suppose it's foolish to say that; these connections have to be. They make us grow." She smiled at me, but rather sadly, and I sensed her mood had changed entirely.

"What is it Kate," I asked gently — "What are you trying to say?"

"I hardly know. It was all so beautiful, and now one has to go back."

"You're lonely, aren't you? You always act as if you're self-contained, but I know better now. I've seen how different you can be as a woman — gay and vivacious and laughing, yet vulnerable too. You need someone like me to look after you . . ."

"No doubt that goes for you too, in the masculine version!"

"Quite so, but unlike you I'll admit I'm very lonely indeed at times, and I'll miss you like hell when I get back to Norwich."

"Will you really, Alex?"

"You know I will. Why are you being obtuse? Don't you already know

how much I care about you?" I stared at her, puzzled. Her lips were trembling and she was perilously close to tears. It was so unexpected I hardly knew what to say to her.

"Forgive me, Alex, I don't know what's come over me. I'm acting like a schoolgirl."

I said quietly, "There must be a reason — you're always the rock that I lean on. I've never seen you this way before."

"And you don't like it?" She looked even more distressed. Feeling concerned, I leaned towards her, taking her hand in mine. "Why do you say that, Kate?" She looked down at the table between us, where so shortly before we had happily shared a meal.

"I've never had anyone to lean on emotionally. Others have always leaned on me. In the past I learned that love flies out the window if I express vulnerability."

"But as a woman you are very vulnerable. It's that combination in you of great strength, and ultra-femininity, that I find so attractive."

She said forlornly, "Oh Alex, why do you have to be so young. Why couldn't we be the same age, and why couldn't we meet ten years ago . . ."

"Is that all that's worrying you?"

"Don't you think it's enough?" She clutched a wisp of handkerchief, and tiny tremors ran through her fingers.

I pulled at her hand and said, "Let's go to your room Kate — I want to talk seriously to you, and I suspect you're going to cry. This isn't the best place for us."

Without a word she followed me, and we climbed the old oak stairs, and wound our way through thickly carpeted corridors to the beamed, low ceilinged room that was hers for the night. It was chilly and I turned on the fire and drew the thick curtains. She moved to put on the lamp, but I caught her hand. "No, not yet, Kate. Hear me first." She stood passively, abjectly, like a child awaiting rebuke. I had never suspected her capable of negative emotion, or purely feminine moods. She reminded me, incredibly, of Sophie during our earliest years.

The electric fire threw a rosy glow on the room. I pulled Kate towards me, and drew her close in my arms, holding her tightly. She was warm and soft, immediately yielding. "I love you — " I said, "I love you, I love you! I thought you knew." She began to cry, a desperate crying that seemed beside itself with grief. I tried to comfort her, kissing her, murmuring words of endearment. Gradually she stopped, and we sat on her bed side by side in the half-light. She choked back the sobs, looking away from me, and holding my hand to her cheek, cupping it against her, like a protection.

Suddenly I perceived what was wrong with her. She had been hurt, deeply and searingly, even more than myself. Someone had damaged her, brutally scarred her . . . My mind groped dimly, shocked by the impact of insight. I knew with certitude that whatever confidence she might possess on other levels, as a woman she had lost all faith in her own desirability, and all hope of ever being loved for herself. An immense sadness moved within me, for reasons beyond me to formulate. I could only hold her close, and attempt in this way to communicate the inarticulate depth of my understanding.

"Kate," I said gently, "When did Patrick leave you?" Her voice was barely audible. "Oh, years and years ago. In 1968 finally, but my marriage was over long before then."

"And you've been alone ever since, save for your son?"

"No, not all that time. I've been alone the last three years, or nearly so."

"About like me, then."

"Timewise, yes."

"Why didn't you tell me, my dear?"

"I couldn't. It's hard to explain. I wanted to know you well first — and if we didn't get that far, it wouldn't have mattered anyway."

"But it does matter. Now, it matters very much. You've been wounded psychologically and it hasn't healed — I suppose you know that . . ." I made her look at me — her eyes were like pools, and dark with pain.

"Dear Alex — what a sweet way to put it. Yes, I know. Of course I know. I've wondered often how I'd be if someone else came into my life, but it seemed so unlikely. I built up a life on my own as best I could."

"And you did splendidly, I would never have known — did not know, until now, that you were so hurt. I ought to have realised . . . If I'd been more perceptive, and less self-centred — oh Kate — darling, forgive me for being so blind — tell me about it if you can, it will help you . . ." She clung to me, pressing her face against my neck, her voice muffled and shaky.

"It's not easy to tell. Like everything else, it's terribly complex. And maybe you'll get all the wrong ideas about me, and everything will be spoiled." She began to cry again.

I stroked her hair, and said quietly but firmly, "It cannot be spoiled. You are you, and I love you. Nothing can alter that." But even as I said it, I knew she had heard it before, and that it had been altered. I drew her round to me, still sobbing, and kissed her damp eyelids. "Whatever has happened in your life, my poor Kate, it's left you unable to trust, and unable to believe that you're lovable." She was silent, but gripped my hand tightly.

"Did he leave you?"

"Yes."

"Harshly and hurtfully?"

"Yes."

"Like Sophie did me?"

"No. There was no-one else. He just stopped loving me — turned against me entirely . . . said terrible things . . . took everything when I was ill, didn't care what happened to me . . ."

"You poor darling," I said softly, "but it happens every day, Kate. People love, and hurt each other, and that love is betrayed."

"But for me it was different. You don't know how it was."

"Tell me then — let me share it and help you . . ." She lifted her head, and touched my face with her fingers, very softly. "You're so good to me, so kind. I really believe you would understand. But I can't talk about it now — not here. Let's wait till we get home." I felt her collect herself together, as if she picked up pieces that were shattered, and drew them to one place within herself. "Alright, Kate, just as you wish," I said — "it will be easier for you now we've broached it."

I kissed her again, and then fiercely, as an obscure anger rose in me against he who had harmed her. She protested and pulled away, but I drew her back, gently, tenderly, and suddenly, with desperation. All my months of control, my iron resolutions, my recent resolve not to press her in any way, were swept from me in an overwhelming tide of trembling, entreating emotion. I held her tightly to me . . . "Let me stay with you Kate . . . oh my love, don't send me away . . ."

For a moment I thought she'd capitulate, her arms were around me, and my kisses returned with sudden fervour. And then she was still — quietly controlled, and I heard her whisper, "It's too soon, Alex," her voice low and anguished. She caressed my head with a tender yearning, soon holding my face in her hands, while we gazed at each other in the semi-darkness, thoughts passing between us in unspoken fusion. We were so close to one another, so very close, as if one.

I saw the tears spill over from her eyes again, and she said softly, with sadness, "We have to wait, my dear . . . There are reasons we neither of us know. If it were not so, I'd let you stay . . . I love you, oh, I love you!" She turned herself away from me, still crying, and caught at my hand and kissed it. "Go *now*," she said, "my dearest, dearest Alex — please try to understand . . ."

I did not understand, yet I knew she had glimpsed some truth. I wrenched myself away from her, my heart pounding violently — mouthed a reluctant 'goodnight', and stumbled along the landing to my room before I could repent it.

We met at breakfast, her face carefully made-up, her manner a little tremulous, but largely calm and composed. She smiled at me and

touched my hand, the bond between us deep, and acutely tender — yet strangely, our relationship was as before, as if the evening hadn't happened — nor did we refer to it.

I returned to find the offices in uproar. Sachs said wryly that Dave had landed a major contract in Canada, and he and Matthew had flown out a week ago to inspect sites and tie up legalities, leaving Bates in charge, assisted by Drysdale — who happened to be between jobs. "God, that was sudden!" I gasped.

"Not really," said Sachs, relishing my surprise — "he's been angling for it long enough. You must have been asleep if you hadn't heard about it."

My lack of attention to all outside my own tasks came suddenly home to me. I realised I knew nothing of recent developments — in fact had hardly seen Matthew since his return. "Great changes are on the way, lad," said Sachs, "Great changes. Dave's like a man with a new mistress, can't do enough for her!" He chortled good humouredly and went back to his desk. He now had an assistant in addition to the much maligned Wisbey. The assistant was a new innovation in the Company — the first female trainee draughtswoman on the firm. "She's good, too," declared Sachs with satisfaction, "well-grounded and quick — you needn't tell her twice. She'll make ten of Wisbey, and halve my workload in no time!"

I had noted a female form hovering around Sachs a few days before my holiday, and assumed she was from reception, or even a typist. Where have I been, I thought — certainly not here, save for the odd day in the flesh, and never in spirit. The young woman approached me, and Sachs introduced us. She was fair and attractive, very slim, and immaculately dressed. Her name was Julie; it was obvious she was destined to become a bright star in Sachs's firmament, and in the skies of others as I soon discerned. Luke was already smitten.

I found her friendly and collected — and doubtless, had I not met Kate, I too, would have gravitated in her direction, or so I thought to myself. Yet perhaps this wasn't true. On reflection I realised it wouldn't have worked. For having found Shah, or he me, whichever way round it was, life would have been pretty desperate without anyone to confide in. I felt with certitude that Julie's views on my studies would be much the same as Sophie's — so I remained aloof, and watched from afar the office dramas unfold.

There was still no letter. I was obliged to accept now that there quite definitely would not be one, and I wrestled with this non-answer like a koan. Had I been wrong to write as I did, of inner perceptions and experiences? John had made plain that this was undesirable. But then, as far as I could see, John had no such matters to divulge.

A backlog of paperwork awaited me, and three days were spent in the office, catching up, followed by evenings in which I reapplied myself to

Shah's books. It turned suddenly cold, and the flat was unusually cheerless and uninviting. I thought of the long winter evenings ahead, and wondered again about moving nearer Kate. It had occurred to me a good arrangement would be for us to share — her son's rooms were empty, and the house, which was not her own, but rented, was very damp. I could provide her with something much better, or even contribute to what she had — but I dared not rush her.

How little I knew of her really — her character, yes; as a person I had seen her in many facets, but her life and its pattern were largely unknown. Blindly, I had always assumed she'd lived much as today, her marriage long over, her children grown. I had asked several times about her former teacher, and she'd told me some of the things he'd said, and a little of the conditions they worked under. But her contact had lasted for less than two years, and her husband's reactions to her interests had led ultimately to separation, and later, divorce. That much I knew, but it was meagre. I realised now there was much more, and for some unfathomed reason she would not, or could not bring herself to tell me of it.

With tenderness I thought of our last evening together, remembering how she had cried, and the things she had said to me. I did not like the thought of another person in her life, but it made no difference. Why should it? I was sad she had suffered, but more than willing to do my best to see that she didn't suffer such harshness again. This weekend, I resolved, we must do some prolonged talking. And again I turned to my books, and immersed myself once more in 'A Perfumed Scorpion'.

How wise is this man, I reflected, as I intently perused his work. This book is a gem; each time I've opened it, it is as though I have never seen it before. Layer upon layer of deepening experience are contained in its pages, and assertions so specific, it is of itself miraculous we do not see them at once. But I, at least, did not — neither on my first reading, nor the second — only later did it yield its secrets, and then parsimoniously.

I quote:

'We must always remember that this is descriptive, and that the student has to go through with the experience of it. It is not enough to memorise, as many people do, this kind of material, and imagine that one knows something.'*

'One of the specialities of the Sufis is to approach the same thing — the needs of the student — from many different directions, so that by what we call 'scatter' (a constellation of impacts), the picture ultimately comes together and he understands.'†

* Idries Shah: *A Perfumed Scorpion*, Octagon Press 1978, pp.90

† Idries Shah: *A Perfumed Scorpion*, Octagon Press 1978, pp.115

‘A major factor additional to the need to prepare the learner for the mystical experience which takes forms not yet even noted in the West, is that of how, when and where, and with whom, the necessary development may be carried out. The consciousness must be attuned in accordance with a knowledge of the possibilities. This is what distinguishes real, traditional Sufi teaching from the forms in which exercises are just handed out randomly.’*

‘It need not, and perhaps should not, be denied that the words and actions of the Sufis have always alluded to a cosmic plan, of which humanity is a part. Human communities are seen as a part of that plan; religions as instruments of the plan; yet all forms of knowledge are admitted as related, more or less directly, to the same plan. The role of the Sufi (and the Sufi is the name for the realised man or woman, not for the mere Seeker After Truth) — you can’t have a Sufi who is still learning any more than all medical students are doctors — is seen as nothing less than an instrument of the plan: but as a conscious instrument, not as a well-wisher or hero, not as a follower or optimist, not as an idealist or even as a dedicated monk.’†

Thursday was a hectic day — spread out between sites in Norfolk and Suffolk, with several clients to call on. The rain pelted down intermittently, and the atmosphere was damp and chilly. I arrived home late and turned in early, feeling tired out and cold. My feet had got wet and I felt lonely and irritable.

Before drifting off to sleep I remembered my dream of Kate crying, and it crossed my mind hazily that it had been a true one. During the night I was aware again of Shah. I seemed to be neither asleep or awake, yet my senses were suddenly alert. I thought I was sitting at my desk in the living-room, resting my head in my hands, in an attitude of dejection. I heard a slight rustle in the room, and, looking up, saw him approaching. He looked rather stern, but said pleasantly enough, “Haven’t you forgotten something?” And I came to myself with a start.

Just as I left the following morning, a package was delivered. It was square and heavy, reminding me oddly of a half-ream of paper. It carried a typewritten address and a Cambridge postmark. I took it with me to the office, and when I got round to opening it, found to my surprise it was from Kate. Her covering letter was warmly affectionate, and said she was sorry she could not see me this weekend, as her brother had sent for her to help with her mother, who had suffered a slight stroke and was asking for

* Idries Shah: *A Perfumed Scorpion*, Octagon Press 1978, pp.149/150.

† Idries Shah: *A Perfumed Scorpion*, Octagon Press 1978, pp.153.

her. She knew my mind was full of questions, and she was sending the enclosed which would answer some of them, namely those about her former teacher, and her earlier life. She asked me to remember it was written many years ago now, and her understanding of much of it had radically changed. She would write again as soon as she could, and let me know when she would be home again, and in the meantime sent me her deepest love.

With heightened interest I inspected the accompanying manuscript — some two hundred pages of quarto typescript. It was dated October 1964. I opened it at random and read:

'The day passed in a kind of blur, but gradually the grief lessened, and the crisis in my mind resolved itself into resignation. I drew a certain peace from the old, walled garden, with its multitude of flowers and herbs. I remember particularly the white Chinese peonies with their subtle scent, and the dark red roses exhaling fragrance as one walked by. The garden held a healing essence, and I drew deeply from it in my desperate need. It was as if nature herself reached out to me, and stilled the agony inside.'

Thoughtfully I rewrapped it in its package and placed it in my briefcase. It was not right to read it piecemeal, it should be read in proper sequence, with sufficient time for reflection, and a quiet room. I felt deeply moved that she had sent it, for until now I had not known of its existence, and I guessed it was precious to her, containing some exposed essence of herself that rendered her completely vulnerable.

Once home again, I fried a meal, turned up the heat, and settled myself at length with a pot of coffee and Kate's manuscript. I didn't know what to expect, but certainly not what I was presented with. It was a detailed record of the spontaneous development from childhood of her psychic capacity, and how this deepened and ran parallel with her life experiences. It also described her growing awareness of a spiritual training given by a being she called 'Father', or 'He of the white robe', whom she later realised was her teacher. The first entry relating to this inner contact, gave her age as sixteen. I include a brief quote from the same year to give a slight inkling of the script's nature:

'I discovered palms could be 'read' effortlessly by focussing my mind, not on the lines themselves, though these were followed visually — but at a point inside my head. Repeated prognostications, expressed and unexpressed, proved correct to such a degree that I became alarmed. This faculty relentlessly revealed both good and bad; 'good' things I could take in my stride, but the reverse side of the coin often proved distressing, and filled me with foreboding. After seeing serious illness ahead for my

mother (on which I remained silent), I abandoned attempts to look into the future, and ceased my studies in this field. However, in due course the illness came — with such severity that it altered the previous course of my mother's life, and changed her entire outlook.'

There was, of course, much more in a similar vein, and set out as an orderly progression of development. Much further on she commented:

'We moved house fourteen times from 1953 to 1964, most of the moves connected with my husband's work as a builder, and each situation was clearly revealed, often months before there was any possibility of the events surrounding it, and sometimes under circumstances hard to credit beforehand. There were facets from other areas of my life likewise fully 'documented' in advance — looking back I can see that these continued perceptions hammered into me the certitude of beneficent guidance, and compelled me to observe carefully the differing levels from which these observations were made, in order to prevent errors of judgement, as not all were precognitive.'

'Dreams for instance sprang from different sources; some were offshoots of daily stresses; some were psychological, and however lucid, conveyed only my own slant on events, and how they affected me as a personality. A finer strata was more objective and was concerned with the wellbeing of others; beyond that lay the subjective experience of the evolving self, and the events awaiting manifestation from this level appeared solely occupied with promoting an interior growth, or alignment, regardless of the discomforts and trials these heaped on the personality, which, incidentally, despite foreknowledge made no attempt to avoid them.'

'Similar equations existed in the realm of clairvoyance and clairauidience. I perceived that the entire range could be tabulated, and its structure analysed and incorporated into a named system. Parallel with the above I lived a busy, normal life as a housewife and mother, and assisted my husband in all aspects of his business . . . '

This note was written, with several others, considerably later than the script, as a kind of summation in retrospect, and gives no indication of the emotional intensity of the narrative itself. The following two excerpts give a hint of this:

'Something in me seemed to quicken at this time, the restless 'seeking' grew stronger and deeper — I wanted knowledge, yes, and understanding — but more than anything I yearned for guidance and contact with the source of all my promptings. I cried out desperately in my heart again and again to be shown the way.'

'I strove inadequately to express in words the light that at times beat upon me, and the utter desolation and despair experienced when it was withdrawn.'

I record here her first major mystical experience, which occurred in full waking consciousness, and is dated 1959.

'During January, in the midst of all the upheaval of our move into unfinished surroundings, an illumination of unusual intensity produced an extraordinary shock in my consciousness. It commenced during the moments of relaxed stillness normally preceding sleep. My mind was empty, then, suddenly, I entered another dimension. My physical body was awake — yet I stood above it in a radiant female form, knowing I was 'I', a Being unified and complete, part of a perfect, unified Whole. I knew Myself, my own identity — this is very difficult to express — and the bliss of the experience was beyond description. I knew the world was a dream, a mirage, an illusion — brought into being solely that souls might gain consciousness. . . . With me, was He whom my soul loved; my Teacher, formerly encountered only in sleep. His face shone like the sun, and his whole Being exuded the most beautiful light. He wore a white robe, as I did myself, and in his hand was a rod, like a wand, with which he touched the ethers, and made them open — and I saw world upon world, layer within layer, all interpenetrating and interlinked in the same space. Every strata of existence was there, from the lowest, grossest form, to the utterly form-less — yet they were one perfect Whole, and all worlds were in reality One.'

'I saw my past, the long, winding path of former incarnations, co-existent with the present and the future, remembering, in the flesh, why I had been born, and that I had laboured long and arduously for what was to come. I grasped I was a pupil, a student in training — dedicated and intent. All that had happened to me in this life was revealed in a different context, and I saw it as I had never done before. I looked through the spheres into my physical body, knowing it to be but the instrument of the Self. The Teacher touched the top of my head with his rod, and golden light poured into me, stimulating and vitalising the physical organism like a charge of electricity. There was a peculiar stretching sensation in the top of my head, as if some fine and delicate membrane was manipulated and expanded — this brought the entire experience into my outer consciousness. It all seemed to have happened simultaneously, in a timeless dimension non-existent in earthly life. As the full impact penetrated my brain, air rushed into my lungs and I re-entered my normal awareness, struggling to grasp and retain the sense of 'I' — but it slipped from me.'

A further section described the formation and work of a small group of women — Joanna was one of them — who linked for three years in a variety of situations which constituted an obvious preparatory phase for the training period that came after.

This was the point at which she met her teacher, and the tone of the writing changed, as if indeed she recaptured the change in herself which took place at that juncture. It is an understatement to say I felt grieved for her — I had not realised that contact with a teaching Master could involve

such emotional pain and violent upheaval in a life. I include here further quotes — though as before, they convey little of the whole, but are brief insights into the nature of her experience:

'About this time I had a dream which set my mind in an unbreakable pattern. The Master hung me upon a cross which stretched between heaven and earth; he swung it slowly into motion, like a pendulum, and I knew I must remain there, suspended in space, until the motion was stilled, and its balance was found.'

'... Some nights later, I awoke to find him bending over me, both hands placed palms downwards on my chest. At the instant I perceived him, some sort of voltage, like electricity, passed through his hands into my body, causing momentarily so much pain I cried out. ... after a few seconds he disappeared.'

'This experience was absolutely clear and positive. I was awake and fully conscious, and saw him in a materialised body apparently as real and solid as his physical form. I felt the pressure of his hands upon my chest, saw the pulsing light within them, and experienced its release into my flesh. It was very dark in the bedroom, but his form was faintly luminous, and his colouring was as always — the only difference being that whereas normally in darkness one would hardly see another person — he appeared as clearly to my vision as if it were daylight. He wore his customary clothing — I even noticed the white shirt cuffs, and dark hairs on his wrists. Not having observed the latter before, I noted them when next I saw him, and they were just as I had seen. ... I mentioned this incident to him, and asked if he had heard me express pain. He replied, "Of course I did," but having acknowledged the experience, he was uninformative.'

'... It had a quite definite effect upon me. My awareness increased and intensified, not in a psychic sense, but in far more intangible ways. The non-visual 'seeing' became consciously clearer, and I was able also to register the thoughts and feelings of others without the use of any faculty save this strange attributeless one.'

'... The morning after sending the letter, I dreamed I was running along a narrow pathway, so narrow in parts I had to use all my strength to thrust myself through. The sky overhead was dark and threatening, and two sickle moons hung low against the blackness. They both pulled with equal strength in opposite directions, but to break the magnetic ring that held them in place, each had to pass the other, and threatened a major eclipse. I watched the moons in terror; blood gushed from my heart, and I felt its warmth against my dress. As I ran I cried bitterly. I wanted desperately to go home.'

'... In a few brief lines, he confronted me with a paradox. All was to continue as before. My inner concentration was not to cease, but to be intensified — yet my daily life must proceed as usual. It was just this that produced conflict between Patrick and myself. He had not recognised its source ... ultimately he too would realise it was my interior dedication alone which set us apart. He was turned outwards, towards the world, and the reality of life, but I was turned inwards, to the Reality of God.'

' . . . For three days I lived in a black wilderness, and when I emerged, it was to steady, unyielding darkness and grief. Daily I cried myself empty, till my stomach felt raw, and my mind numbed and exhausted. Nothing helped me or comforted me — the darkness had eclipsed the light, and I was locked out — suspended in a no-mans-land between God and Creation. Words fail to describe this condition; it was ghastly.'

' . . . There was now a distinct change in his behaviour towards me — the subtly insidious undercurrent producing self-analysis greatly intensified; he would permit me comfort for a brief hour, then plunge me into the most agonising emotional turmoil with a few sharp words of criticism, or the most unjust accusations concerning my inner motivation. This mental torture was not applied to anyone else, save in the mildest and most inoffensive manner, but to me his words were barbed and crucifying. He rent my psychology apart, and placed it under the magnifying scrutiny of suggestion and inference.'

' . . . One way in which pupils were assisted, he said, was by releasing them from unwanted and retrogressive sanskaric impressions, which could block their progress, or lead them astray. These impressions were the residues of former phases of experience — and certain souls were able to take these upon themselves and "burn them out" rapidly without personal entanglement or harm, or else were used to relay them, as intermediaries, to the Master, who himself dealt with them.'

' . . . I had noticed before, and increasingly consciously after this particular day, that the inflexion in his voice conveyed certain levels of understanding — almost like the scale heading a sheet of music. Sometimes he spoke spiritual truths, sometimes worldly truths, but most times a mixture of both. This produced the apparent confusion in understanding in many who heard him; they would all think he had said something different, and assume the others had misunderstood. It always seemed to me that one thing was said on the surface, and quite another lay underneath, depending upon one's comprehension. However, in certain rare private conversations, he spoke openly to me without veiling, in a different manner altogether. He would never explain or clarify, but the phrasing he used of itself somehow had a penetrative effect.'

' . . . This . . . revealed geometrically — and simultaneously in symbol, a recurring archetypal 'event'. My brain translated it visually as a scene reminiscent of the Last Supper of Jesus, with an oblong wooden trestle set with many places. This was again shown in diagram or map form — each place being inscribed with a name, not in letters but root-sound and electrical sign. The central place was for the Head of a governing body, or Hierarchy — who could be designated a Christ, and the other places were, I knew, for recurring types, but not necessarily recurring individuals. Suddenly I grasped my own 'sound' was among them, and perceived its sign, which I recognised — and immediately registered a whole host of facts, which faded at once. I tried to retain them, but, as happened so frequently, they were literally withdrawn from my brain consciousness.'

‘ . . . When this was eventually mentioned, he questioned me carefully about my recollection, asking where exactly I thought diagrammatically my place had been, and what it all meant. I recounted the place, but the meaning had largely gone. He commented that what I had seen was existent throughout time, and the places were functions which were constantly fulfilled by relays of souls who afterwards moved on. Strangely, after this conversation, my memory of my ‘place’ disappeared, and I could not recall it at all.’

‘ . . . and resigned myself to what I felt was God’s Will. With a one-pointed effort that involved my Totality — I moved against the current within myself, and turned myself, metaphorically, to face the other way. I dimly sensed that for me it signified an ending — the point of culmination on a timeless, eternity-bound journey. I knew, yet I did not know — that it was the beginning of the Greater Mystery, the death in life — and paradoxically, the end of the beginning, the first stage, on the gross-plane level, of total abnegation. Mercifully, I did not grasp that it would repeat, and repeat again, and yet again . . . all along the line that comprised my being.’

These excerpts give a somewhat lopsided view of Kate’s script, for the purely human side is missing — yet she described also, in considerable detail, the effect on her mundane life, her marriage, and her personal psychology. The overall picture that emerged was of a sensitive, perceptive woman, who was nevertheless a very normal individual, undergoing an unsought, titanic ordeal she found impossible to avoid. After the initial flowering of her relationship with the Teacher — in which she learnt implicit trust in him — strong pressures were placed upon her, and steadily increased as she became able to bear more. As I read on I found it harrowing, even horrifying that she was forced to suffer so, and I saw clearly the dilemma she was placed in, and the agony of conflict, both mental and emotional, that must have torn her almost apart.

It was as if she was tested to discern exactly how much she could bear without breaking, and, far more important, without reacting to the teacher with hostility or denial. I have since seen other possibilities, but on that evening they did not occur to me. I read until midnight, then could take no more — it was too distressing. The words evoked the woman, young and loving, dedicated and one-pointed — utterly sincere. The all-too graphic narration of her expulsion, disgrace, and public humiliation for adhering to her insights, and the incredible, near-savage behaviour of husband, family and erstwhile friends, was difficult to assimilate with equilibrium. I wondered how the Teacher must have felt, himself a young man, forced of necessity, as I dimly realised, to treat her harshly, and saw suddenly that it must have caused him equal pain.

I went to bed in a strange mood, deeply affected, unable to grasp the

import of her experience, and stricken to the core by her suffering. In my sleep I grieved for her afresh, and found myself at length standing in a great church, with a furnace instead of an altar, glowing fiercely red and attended by a white-robed priest. He looked at me calmly and said, "Only His own Elect does he pass through the fire," and a profound peace entered me and absorbed the pain, and I slept on dreamlessly, or so it seemed, and woke refreshed.

On Saturday I finished reading the typed sheets, and registered with an inner shock the odd *dénouement* at the end, which vindicated Kate's insights, though without altering one whit her situation. The document was obviously incomplete, and I reasoned the whole thing out thoughtfully and thoroughly according to my own hopeful conception. At this consoling juncture, something stirred in my memory — an elusive factor culled from sleep — and my attention was suddenly switched from the purely personal trial Kate had passed through, to an awareness of an overall, deliberate and objective purpose.

With a powerful flash of insight I saw the entire process of the Teacher's working as the establishment of a prototype, a small scale 'trial run' which was destined later to repeat itself, in a manner I perceived momentarily but could not grasp. I knew it had to do with the testing and training of many aspirants, and the shattering of recalcitrant egos, and would reverberate far into the future. It had an uncanny semblance to my dream of the Sufi School, where, on a much larger scale, was worked out the same theme, with Shah as the activating factor. I understood it was part of a train of transmission — an initial facet of the 'beginning of the beginning'.

This strange thought penetrated my consciousness, and I had the clear impression that it drew about itself many kindred perceptions, like pieces of a jigsaw, which in time, when more was added, would reveal to me the meaning of my life, and the destiny of my soul.

I will not attempt to make further quotes, as such brevity is useless as an approximation of the whole. For Kate I guessed it was no longer relevant, being merely the husk from which the wheat has been winnowed. Its value as an experience had already been reaped, and brought to further fruition through Shah; but I was grateful to her for the background insight, and wrote a long letter on Sunday expressing my feelings with much tenderness, and afterwards felt more at ease, and returned to my studies.

Another busy week engulfed me, and I covered miles between sites, and wore myself to shreds with erratic clients. Usually all went smoothly, but every now and then we ran into problems, though two eccentrics in one week was a merciful rarity. Both clients were elderly women, of the monied and autocratic type I have learned to detest, and my mind was

turned effectively from the spiritual to the very mundane.

We were nearing the end of Dave's second week away, and Thursday brought a cable announcing his return over the weekend. It also brought me a weary letter from Kate, full of affection and gratitude for my own, but betraying her total exhaustion, and informing me that she had no hope of returning until Monday, when a hospital bed would be available and she could leave her mother in safe hands.

I felt disappointed, having already rehearsed in my mind her homecoming, but it could not be helped, and I decided instead to visit Cambridge anyway, and tour the estate agents once again in the hope of a possible purchase. And this I did, and found to my great pleasure a small Victorian house that could well prove ideal; quietly situated and detached, with a pleasant old-fashioned garden that was overgrown but still reclaimable.

In view of its lack of modernisation I placed an offer with the agents, hoping fervently that no-one would cap it — and feeling well pleased, had lunch in the city, and afterwards made for Heffers bookshop and spent a blissful hour browsing.

At this point someone hovered near me, and a female voice said brightly, "Hallo, Alex, how are you?" Surfacing from the Divan of Hafiz, I looked up to see Joanna. She was dressed in green which suited her extremely well — in fact, she looked quite charming, and also disarmingly pleased to see me.

"You're a real old bookworm," she said, "I've been watching you for at least ten minutes, and you didn't even notice!" I apologised, and commented courteously on the attractiveness of her attire. She was delighted, and instead of moving away, to my dismay came closer.

"Are you still studying Sufism?" she queried, peering at the book in my hand. I nodded, and held out the Hafiz. She glanced at it quickly, and said she had seen the poetic version many years previously. "Why didn't you come to the meetings?" her voice was plaintive — "I looked out for you every time!" Despite her tone she smiled engagingly.

I grinned back at her — "It wasn't quite what I had in mind . . . The one I went to — yes, I did go that evening! — was run on different lines to what I'd hoped for. In fact, your people aren't connected with Idries Shah at all!"

"Does that matter?" she said rather tartly.

"Well, it does to me. It's Shah's work I'm studying."

"Don't you think it's good to broaden the mind a little — not to restrict oneself too narrowly? We aren't supposed to be rigid you know!" She turned on the charm again.

"Have you read Shah's books?" I asked.

"I've seen them, and think I did read one, but they don't appeal to me particularly. Have *you* read our Leader's?" I had to confess I had not.

"You see what I mean? You're avoiding something which may give you just what you need! You should read his books and come to the meetings — then you will be better able to judge Sufism as a whole!"

"I have what I need already, Joanna. I'm absolutely certain this is the way for *me*, and I'm not making adverse comments or criticisms about the people you're referring to — I know nothing about them; but the one meeting I attended was gone to in the belief that it had a connection with Shah. No ill-feelings!"

She pursed her lips. "I don't agree with you of course," she said, "but we all have our own ways. Our Leader is acknowledged throughout the world as a powerful Teacher, and can initiate those who come to him — but as far as I know Idries Shah is just a writer! You should think about that."

I made no comment — I did not wish to embark on what I could see would be a fruitless discussion.

"Are you still living in Norwich?" she said sweetly, "or did you find a flat in Cambridge after all?"

"I think today I've found myself a house."

"Well, well! This is an auspicious occasion then! Come and have coffee with me and tell me about it."

I felt an extreme reluctance, but did not like to rudely rebuff her, and though my mind fumbled about, I could not immediately produce a plausible excuse. "Oh, come *on*!" she insisted, "I won't eat you! It will do you good to talk." She smiled encouragingly, and I resignedly followed her. We went to 'The Whim' further along the street, and I ordered coffee and cakes. Joanna almost purred with pleasure.

I had to admit she was very entertaining, and she talked vivaciously for some minutes before saying suddenly, "Have you seen Adrian lately?" I looked at her blankly.

"How do you know that I know Adrian?"

"A little bird told me," she murmured coyly, and then, catching my sardonic eye, "but seriously, I met him quite by chance, and asked him to dinner with another friend, and we had a delightful evening! He was talking of old times, as one does, and happened to mention Kate — and said he'd passed on her address to a fellow-Sufi and hoped she hadn't minded. I thought of you at once strangely enough, and when he said your name of course I was sure!" She paused expectantly — "*Did* you visit her?" Her eyes held mine firmly for the briefest moment, then she said archly, "I can see you did! How is she these days?"

"Quite well I think." My voice was suitably non-committal.

"Did she help you?" Her eyes were very bright. I grasped she had the fullest intention of learning all she could.

"Yes, she did! She's a very knowledgeable person."

"She is very intuitive of course. I expect you know we used to meet together quite often."

"So she said." My abruptness shamed me, but she didn't appear to notice.

"*She* told you? Now *that* surprises me! I assumed it was Adrian!"

"Why should it surprise you, Joanna? I understood you were friends." I felt, in the oddest way, I was playing for time.

"Oh, yes, we were! *All* of us were very close for ages! But she's a strange girl, she doesn't seem to want to pick up the threads. Perhaps she finds the memories too painful?" She raised her eyebrows as if querying whether I knew to what she referred.

"Perhaps she does." I said, unsure what line to take, and uncomfortably aware we approached deep waters. Joanna sighed reflectively.

"She was ill at the end — I suppose she told you that. I think it was all too much for her. It must have been quite dreadful with Sergei being unwell all the time, and always criticising her, then arranging to leave . . . I felt very, very sorry . . . But that's always the risk with you married men!" She laughed gently.

So he had a wife already. I ought to have guessed. I could imagine, painfully, poor Kate's distress. "I'm no longer married," I said, hoping she would now drop the subject.

"Oh! How nice! So we're all of us free!"

"You're also on your own?"

"At the moment, yes! But one never knows what fate may bring. If I met someone nice enough, I'd like to marry again." She looked demurely at me.

"I suppose that goes for most of us."

"You too! I thought you were the homeloving type! I expect Kate thought so too."

"She hasn't said."

"Oh, she'll have summed you up! She's very perceptive as we both know. It's *so* surprising she didn't realise how unhappy she'd be with Sergei . . . but he was *crazy* about her, Alex, and made her *so* many promises, I think he swept her right off her feet! He took that beautiful cottage, and insisted she leave her job. His doctor said it would make a new man of him. But of course it didn't. He worried so much about money, he got worse instead of better, and had her running *all* the time. But she *adored* him! It was really quite touching. She lived in hopes he'd recover and be a proper lover to her." She paused for breath, her eyes still on me.

I felt unreasonably I was somehow betraying Kate in hearing things she had not told me herself — yet I knew with peculiar certainty that if Joanna had an inkling of my ignorance, she would say much more with intent to shock me.

"I expect you knew him well," I remarked casually, carefully stirring my coffee.

"Gracious yes, for many years. He was never happy with his wife, and would have gone off with me if I'd let him get that far!" Her tone delicately reproached Kate for letting it happen. With commendable nonchalance I smiled and said, "He was a bit of a philanderer then?"

"Heavens no, you couldn't call him that. He was never unfaithful to Anna until Kate came on the scene. He fell head over heels in love with her — he thought she was perfect! It was sad, really, a man of his age making such an exhibition of himself — he was like a lovesick boy, everyone noticed it. He couldn't keep away from her!" She gazed up at me innocently — "She has that effect on some men as I expect you've already discovered."

"I don't think so. I wouldn't describe her as a 'femme fatale'."

"Wouldn't you? That's interesting. But it's a fact that men like her tremendously. They always think her shy and gentle, which she is of course, but under all that sweetness she can be very firm, and always goes her own way. Sergei thought he could change her but he wasn't able to. He used to get very upset because he couldn't influence her. He was a brilliant man, but she wouldn't accept his views. Naturally he wanted her to put him *first*, not her so called teacher — with whom she wasn't even in contact."

"Surely he shared her concepts?" I said, feeling puzzled that she should live with another Patrick.

"Well, yes, he did, but he didn't take it to extremes like she did. And some of the things she felt as intuitive, he suspected were self-will — that she might have got mixed-up as we all do sometimes! Once he'd got her, he thought they should get such matters into perspective and settle down and go slowly. After all, he was thirteen years older than she was. His wife held all his assets too, you see, and he was afraid of spending anything. All the things he'd said they'd do — he wouldn't; he said he simply couldn't afford to travel around, and wanted to conserve what little capital he had. He retired too, because of his health, as soon as they set up house together. *That* was an absolute disaster."

I felt rather sick.

"Are you saying that Kate didn't consider his health or financial condition?"

"Oh no. She said it needn't make any difference, that everything would

be looked after if they did the right things. You must know her rather naive philosophy — but he couldn't trust in it, so she had to do what he wanted. He tied her up completely. And he drained her utterly! It was like watching her die — all the light went out of her."

"Didn't you all try to help?"

"Of course we did. We visited them often and encouraged her to accept it. Adrian went every night for *months*! I think he rather overdid it. But Sergei was a lovely man, very distinguished looking, with a marvellous mind. Professionally he was very highly thought of — he was in electronics — a Russian-born Pole — one of the old aristocracy; I suppose you know that? Also an artist, very gifted — his paintings were remarkable — but he was terribly jealous and possessive and couldn't bear Kate out of his sight. Completely incapacitated as a man, you see — she *must* have told you that, and he was afraid of losing her . . ."

"It sounds an appalling situation. I didn't realise it had been so unproductive . . ." Oh Kate, my dearest Kate — no wonder you cried.

"Yes, she's had a rough time, I'm sure she regretted letting Joel go . . ." Again the arch, sideways glance to see how I took it. My stomach felt suddenly hollow.

"She told you about Joel of course?"

"Of course."

"Then I'm not telling you anything new!" She sighed, as if with relief.

"Does it matter if you are?"

"Well, I don't wish to interfere. I don't know how close you are, and you might not like to hear about her husband."

"I know about her husband, but I thought his name was Patrick."

"Oh, that was her *first* husband. She met Joel after everything broke up. I thought you knew!"

"I did, vaguely."

"That's alright then! I thought she was crazy when I heard about it, I suppose she was so lonely and unhappy that she took the first opportunity that presented itself."

"You mean she married him?" My face was masklike.

"Not straight away — I think they lived together for about a year — he had a breakdown and she nursed him."

"Poor Kate. That seems to have been her lot in life." My throat was dry. I found it difficult to articulate. Joanna watched me carefully, her manner kind and sympathetic. She continued brightly — "He was well over it when I saw them — they got on well together, everyone thought they were very happy, but we didn't expect it to last, naturally."

"Why not?" I said calmly, whilst my mind reeled with shock.

"Well, he was too young for her, wasn't he? — and also right out of her

class — ex public school etc.”

I commented, weakly, “I take it you didn’t like him?”

“Goodness no! He was gorgeous! Very nice looking — but of course *all* Kate’s men are. She always manages handsome men, heaven knows how — Patrick was too! But Joel was a different type altogether. A genius academically — an Honours Degree and all the trimmings. Terrifically mature mentally, but nearly half her age! He doted on her, mind you, but he was forever studying — he didn’t keep her — she always seemed to be subsidising *him*!”

I felt so sick now I knew it was imperative to leave, so I stood up and said I couldn’t stay longer as I had other purchases to make. She gushed and sparkled, and invited me to dinner, suggesting dates, and the promise of meeting Adrian, but I pleaded work-problems and said I would contact her sometime when I was free.

At last I shook her off, paid the bill, and made for the car park, feeling a merciful numbness. I drove straight back to Norwich, my mind in a state of suspension; and all I could think in the background was a dull re-iteration, “Why didn’t you *tell* me, Kate? Oh Kate, why didn’t you *tell* me.”

The pleasure had gone from the day, and the thought of the house. I felt as if I’d received a violent blow, and awaited the pain that would come as I came to my senses once more. Like a robot I sped down the roads, turning mechanically on the Norwich outskirts, driving without conscious thought and attention. At last I stopped, and in a dazed bewilderment, found myself outside the cottage, my former home — the one I’d shared with Sophie.

Why on earth had I come here? Whatever possessed me? I looked helplessly through the car window at the well-known front garden — the wooden gate, the old oak door. Even the curtains looked familiar, and then I remembered they’d been sold with the house. A dull anguish commenced inside me, a gnawing ache that grew in intensity and threatened soon to break its boundaries. The welling grief rose to engulf me, and I moved away, memories flooding, merging — Sophie and Kate, Kate and Sophie. Subtly they fused in my mind, as if one.

Trembling, I entered the flat, and sat down on my bed. I felt stunned, yet I wasn’t sure why. Joanna’s voice still purred in my head. I remembered her words, so artless and innocent — just bare bones of facts, yet beneath them — the undertones — the subtle innuendo. My temples throbbed; I forced myself to think steadily through what she’d said to me, and somehow to add it all up, but other images kept intruding, as if I had suffered a shock.

This Joel upset me. A young man half her age . . . with all this, implied. I could not bear to dwell on it. And the older man, ailing, obsessively

jealous . . . “completely incapacitated”. Afraid, quite naturally (*why* quite naturally?) he would lose her. “But she *adored* him! — it was really quite touching” . . . “She always manages handsome men (heaven knows *how*). All Kate’s men are . . .” “Adrian went every night for *months*! — I really think he rather overdid it.” . . . “Men like her tremendously”, etc. etc. The inference was obvious, but it did not fit my concept of Kate. Kate who had spurned me, but had not spurned them.

My emotions rejected Joanna’s depiction, but my mind acknowledged the truth of basic facts she was hardly likely to fabricate. They didn’t line up, and I was thrown again into confusion. What *were* these men that she should so love them? Brilliant, distinguished, gifted, handsome, — Mensa I.Q.! — how could I compete with that? Did I want to compete with it? What chance had I anyway? And furthermore, did I still want a chance? Was Kate, like Sophie, a projected image of what I most desired, and herself a different person entirely . . .?

I thought about Sophie, my head pressed against my knuckles, picturing her vividly as she was on our wedding day, eighteen and innocent in her white lace dress. I recalled the scent of the flowers she carried, light yet heady, like cowslips; and her own perfume, drifting softly towards me as we walked the aisle of the dim, incensed church . . . My gentle, elegant, beautiful Sophie — to whom I had given my heart, my longing, my pent-up desire and struggling aspiration.

And what had she done with them? When she grew up, matured, became self-possessed — and I was no longer her hero — when she was ‘liberated’ and knew what she wanted — and I wasn’t it. My heart began to thud uncomfortably. I can’t go through it all again, I thought — and yet I couldn’t stop it . . . it was as though a door unlocked, and its sealed-up memories slid quietly out.

I recalled through a blur that dreadful night . . . after Max gave her all that whisky. What had she called me? My thoughts fumbled with the words, which emerged in sudden clarity from my brain. Victorian! Out of the Ark! A bloody strait-laced prude! And she had thought it of me for years. Years! And I didn’t know, with my idiotic tendernesses and high-flown ideals. I didn’t know! I’d had no idea.

And now Kate. To whom I had given my heart. And I had given it, oh yes; it ached too much to lie. What was Kate really like? Another Sophie? How could I know? Poor, blind fool that I was . . . Raw. Introvert. Out of touch . . . A hopeless judge of women. Brokenly I assessed myself, till I could restrain no longer the damned-up emotion, and cried myself nearly stupid.

After what seemed a very long time, I got up from the bed, forced myself to bath and shave, then sorted through my accounts. I made

cheese toast and coffee; wrote to my Bank Manager, and put on a Brahms record which I followed to its conclusion. Then I went back to my books.

I did not reply to Kate's letter — I could not bring myself to do so. I shut her from my mind as if she didn't exist, and fixed my attention on the teaching stories and the man behind them. I knew I was being unfair, but I couldn't help myself. In order to work at all, and be normal, I had to skim round the edges of shock — to somehow blunt it; yet every time I forgot, and relaxed the iron barrier of control, I heard myself cry like a child, "Oh Kate, why didn't you *tell* me?"

On Wednesday came another letter. She had returned Monday evening, and had hoped to find a note from me, or one by Tuesday's post. Was I alright? Her letter was loving and anxious. She rose before my eyes in memory as she had been those lovely days in Scotland . . . my Kate, my companion. My friend.

I sat down at my desk, ignoring the passage of time that demanded me elsewhere, and thought, rather foolishly, that it was all a storm in a teacup. What if poor Kate had involved herself? Her manuscript had set out the tragic conundrum with which she had been confronted — amid the ruins of her marriage, why should she not later console herself by loving and being loved. What if he was so much younger than I — she too had been much younger then, and age was no barrier now, past the first bloom of youth, as I had discovered. I faced the fact it was not the older man who troubled me, but the younger — the one she had married.

Yet what right had I to require of her a virtual sainthood, towering above all bodily needs. And was I being honest in this unconsidered concept — did I really wish Kate so far beyond me? My own needs disturbingly remained. And I had hoped for her reciprocation. Somewhere in my mind I was strangely mixed up — I could see that. What assailed me was not her humanity, but my fear of what it involved, the form it might take. I had imagined her to be just like myself, but the essence of Joanna's words revealed a different woman — and then I realised suddenly that Joanna had judged her as herself — that in her words she projected her own impressions of Kate, based on her *own* desires. It was patently obvious even to me that she was jealous — I did not for one moment believe her story of refusing Sergei. Had she captured his affections she would have accepted him, married or not. I knew beyond doubt that if I made appropriate advances, there was no fear at all of denial.

Shakily I found my pen, and wrote a brief letter, telling Kate I had found a house, and met Joanna, and would come to see her in a few days. I sent her my love, and hoped things had not been too harrowing for her. The depth of my feeling leaked out, yet the style used was stilted. I glossed it by expressing haste.

I posted the letter and went into the office block prepared to apologise to Dave, but he wasn't yet in, and no-one appeared to have noticed my absence. Dave's return had been jubilant. He'd signed up not one contract, but half-a-dozen, and he and Matthew were perpetually closeted, poring over plans and specifications. In a few days time Matt was to fly back and open a company branch in Ontario. As Sachs had so rightly said, "great changes" were pending; and Dave's attitude towards me had thawed, and awkwardly bloomed afresh in his overtures. I had wondered briefly what was in his mind, but my own affairs eclipsed all else.

On Thursday evening, I wrote again to Shah. The decision to do so had formed in the last two days, and pressed urgently to the forefront of my attention. My letter was quite unlike its predecessors — far less subjective, but told him of my self-initiated studies, and their initial effects upon my powers of observation — and my now pronounced awareness, periodically, of their workings within my mind.

I slipped out into the dark October night, crisp and sharp with frost, to post it, and came back scuffing my shoes through fallen leaves with an odd sense of 'inner stop' — a kind of pause which I likened intuitively to the momentary interlude between one bar of music and the next. I slept dreamlessly, and woke in better spirits, but these soon diminished. I knew, unreasoningly, that today I must see Kate, and felt a deep reluctance to face her with a barrier rising between us that had not been present before. I spent the day in Norfolk, then hurried home, ate hastily, changed, and was on my way.

She was waiting for me. I knew that she realised something was wrong as soon as I saw her. She ushered me in, produced coffee and sandwiches, and told me quietly and rather sadly about her mother, who now lay partly paralysed in hospital. Every now and then her eyes sought mine, a query in them, and a hint of pain.

I told her about the house, and that I awaited a response to my offer. She knew its location — it was quiet and pretty, and would suit me well, she said. Then silence, and at last she asked "And Joanna?" and I told her of our meeting, and how it came about that we talked together at 'The Whim'. She was too polite to ask the details of our conversation, but sat looking into the fire, an enclosed expression on her face unknown to me. I told her the bit about Adrian, and that Joanna had asked if I had followed up the address. Kate was silent. It gave a numbing sense of unreality to the now familiar room, and to Kate herself.

Never before had I been at a loss for words with her. I longed to touch her, to reach out to her and act as if nothing had happened. Nor had it, of course. Suddenly she lifted her head and looked me full in the eyes — her own dark and unhappy. "She talked about me," she said, "and told you of

things I'd intended to tell you the weekend I was called away. But I daresay her version wouldn't be the same. And you were quite shattered. Isn't that so?"

I could not deny it, and nodded bleakly. "I tried to deflect her, Kate, by pretending I knew. But it didn't altogether work. I was, as you will appreciate, in the very vulnerable position of total ignorance." She closed her eyes as if I had stabbed her, and I grieved inwardly.

"And you turned away from me."

"Oh no, Kate, not that! But I didn't know how to place my thoughts. I felt so stunned, my only recourse was not to think them at all — it wasn't possible to sort things out without talking with you — and of course, I found it hard to understand why you hadn't told me a little of your life before . . ."

"I suppose you came to certain conclusions?" Her eyes were glistening as if full of unshed tears.

"Not really, no. At least, if I did, they were only about myself. I went back to my studies, and fixed my mind on Shah. It was the only way I could cope with my emotions." The silence between us was fraught with tension. She said, at length, "You couldn't have done better" her voice oddly clipped.

I felt unutterably wretched. Kate poked the fire and stared fixedly into the flames. She remarked, in a low tone — "Doubtless you believed all she told you."

"She didn't tell me much, Kate, and broadly speaking I assume the facts are correct, or she wouldn't have dared to state them so baldly. She's no fool, certainly. And you had yourself indicated there'd been someone else, someone who hurt you. What distressed me was your marriage to this — young man. And her subtle inference that there were others, too."

"There weren't any others. She judges me by herself. She assumes there were opportunities as several men visited me and appeared to be attracted. But what attracted them she doesn't know or understand. She simply believes that I, like herself, was intent on finding lovers, and willing to sleep with anyone presentable." She spoke without emphasis or bitterness, but with an incisive insight.

"I didn't realise you saw her that way, Kate," I said, remembering their long acquaintance with puzzlement.

"I didn't see her that way for many years. Nor any of them for that matter. I was psychologically blind, my head in the clouds, believing they were all trying to follow the same Way as myself — because they *said* they did — and getting stupidly hurt over and over again by their actions and reactions, and their judgements of myself and my motivations. I had to learn the hard way what they were really like, and make allowance at the

same time for their genuine aspirations. But sometimes, as now, it is folly to underestimate the damage they can do unwittingly, or *will* do quite deliberately! I have no more illusions on that score."

"But Kate, knowing these possibilities, why didn't you tell me in the beginning you had married again? It wouldn't have troubled me then. Why should it? What made you conceal it? Or your unhappy love-affair. Why leave it for someone like Joanna to distort, and spoil something beautiful in my mind." Too late I realised how cruel were my own implications, but her face was impassive.

"I didn't know you would meet Joanna," she said. "I didn't realise you might come into Cambridge as you did. And there was no intent to *conceal* anything. I had the fullest intention to explain it all to you, as I said, on our return from Scotland. On the first day we talked, if you remember, I told you I feared to say too much, too soon, and in the wrong order. You could hardly expect me to bring out a complex history when I barely knew you. I've been overfrank before, and bitterly to my cost! Why do you suppose Sergei was so violently jealous? I told him far too much without realising that emotionally he was still immature, though his body was nearly sixty, and his mind like Methusaleh. His imagination worked overtime, and his *own* past experiences confirmed his suspicions, *all* of which were falsely based. It was a combination which bred havoc, for himself and for me.

"There were other reasons too. If our contact was brief, it wouldn't matter, but if it was destined to last, or to be of some consequence — I wanted the chance to have you know me first as a person, and not just see me through the eyes of wrongful association . . ." She looked angry and indignant, yet woefully upset. I got up from my chair and moved towards her, gently touching her shoulder. "But my dearest, I *do* know you as a person, and I love and respect you," I said.

"You loved your conception of me" she retorted, lifting my hand away. "When Joanna gave you a different concept, you were terribly unsure. The facts are unarguable. Joel and Sergei *were* part of my life, and learning this, you imagined me at once, and quite understandably no doubt, as a rather different woman. Perhaps not exactly as Joanna suggested, but uncomfortably close."

"Oh Kate, no!" I protested, feeling increasingly agitated. She stared down at her hands, continuing relentlessly, "This was the very thing I feared if I told you myself. Oh yes, I could explain most carefully, and present myself in any way I chose. People do it all the time! But would it really have made any difference? You would *still* have drawn your own conditioned conclusions from the unalterable facts. As others have done before you. But I had no wish to deceive you; I know what *I'm* like, and I

know what *you* are like. I delayed things hoping you would see our kinship for yourself, and recognise the background similarities which shaped us. We've both been powerfully influenced by parents who held Victorian ideals — the kind you find in the best novels . . . and *their* brand of Christian morality has been inbred in us." She looked at me reproachfully.

"It's very hard to undo," she said — "combined with hypersensitivity and a deep aspiration — virtually impossible . . . Only an extreme factor could over-ride it — one that can't be casually described over a cup of tea between strangers — you need a much more meaningful relationship than that!" Her words were almost scornful, yet her tear-moist eyes belied this.

My throat felt constricted with emotion — a strange conflux of feeling that sought resolution, but could not overcome the tension engendered by the thought of Joel. I was sure she knew this.

"You should already realise," she said coolly, "that no matter how tolerant and open our outlook, how thoughtlessly promiscuous our friends, and how permissible — or even desirable — such conduct is now considered; people like us can't *do* what others do, in the way others do it, although our lives and actions may make this appear outwardly so. And you know perfectly well what I mean!"

I did, of course, but emotionally it was no consolation.

"Your reactions are dual." Her voice was abrupt, curt almost, but with a curious underlying hurt. "You're jealous because you think others experienced with me, and I with them, what we haven't experienced together. And you're fearful as well, in case I've struck a note too low in the octave — which you couldn't condemn, but would find it impossible to blend with. A correct diagnosis?"

I could not speak, but nodded mutely, a growing turmoil in my chest.

"You've read my manuscript, Alex. And you understood it — you understood *me* as if I were yourself. Your letter is proof of this. Do you really think the woman who wrote it is as Joanna believes? Joanna was there too, remember. She had her opportunity along with the rest of us, but saw nothing consciously of what really occurred, and eventually turned away. She judged me wrongly then, and now she's even further from the possibility of perception. Nor is it possible for her to pass on to you, or to anyone else, the facts concerning myself and Joel — or even Sergei. She didn't know them. She knew nothing but what she *thought* she saw, and what she surmised. I didn't once discuss with her the realities!" She stopped, and caught her breath in a sobbing sound, and then she stood up, turning away from me, moving some books and papers on the table in front of her.

"Perhaps you had better go," she said, "and come back another time if you want to. I don't think I can talk any more today." I got to my feet,

hardly able to believe what she was saying, and moved towards her, reaching out instinctively to touch her, to hold her, to turn her to me. Her back was rigid, and she wouldn't move.

"It's no use Alex . . ." her voice faltered. "It will always lie between us. I'll never now be able to explain it adequately. Please go." She pulled violently away from me, ignoring my protests, and went swiftly from the room. I heard her somewhere close a door.

For a few moments I wrestled with the impulse to follow her, to force myself upon her, forget this foolishness and take her in my arms and kiss her soundly — but my responses were unaccountably neutralised, unnaturally passive; and all the time the churning within me was rising — and I felt increasingly that I was being torn in conflict between two poles. Kate! I cried in my heart, don't leave me; don't send me away . . .

The house was silent, as if empty. I looked hopelessly round me, at the books, the plants, the polished chest, her writing table — the numdah rug with its vivid flowers, the lamps, the pictures. Everything in the room had Kate stamped upon it — and I had come to know it as well as my own.

Through my mind flashed recollections of the many talks we'd had here; the kindness and attention she had given me — the love that had grown between us like a rare gift in the former wilderness of our lives. A black gulf yawned suddenly in front of me — an emptiness, a desolation. I imagined, graphically, my life devoid of Kate, devoid of all companionship and love. I went out to the hall. It was dark, and I switched on the light. "Kate!" I called, "where are you?" but she didn't reply. The kitchen was empty, and the small dining room. She still lived on the ground floor as she had done when her son was there. She must have gone to her bedroom.

I tapped on the door. Her voice said, pleadingly, "Alex, *please* go" and the anguish in me rose sharply to a crescendo. I opened the door, unable to make myself speak. The light wasn't on, and it was cold in the room — the small electric fire gave an orangey glow, and I saw Kate huddled on the bed, near its edge, her head down and her shoulders shaking. She was crying as she had cried before, on the last evening of our holiday, but soundlessly. I spoke her name in a whisper. It came out harshly, but audibly — "Kate!"

She looked up, faintly visible in the firelight. With split-second insight I recalled my dream of Joanna — and Kate crying just as she was crying now. Confused, I sat by her side, my thoughts in chaos. Then into my mind was released the impactive awareness that I had *experienced* this scene already; lived through it beforetime, precognitively in sleep — and this being so, the entire situation was therefore more than mere chance. The thought was volcanic, disruptive; disturbing . . . An echo of the Teacher's

voice returned to me, explaining patiently some substance that I couldn't recapture. I struggled, futilely, to remember — it was something to do with myself . . . not with Kate at all. Something dark, and covered over. It didn't make sense. I knew only, with insistent certitude, that he had *intended* this — that I had not blundered stupidly into Joanna of my own accord . . . he had designed it so. Dear God . . . but why?

I sat like a statue, my hand on Kate's shoulder, while she cried silently, heartbrokenly, her body convulsing with stifled sobs. I tried hard to focus my mind. Some ungrasped perception affected my emotions, which rose like waves on an incoming tide, pushing upwards and outwards with turbulent intensity, as if to expel an unseen core. I began to feel frightened, and to shiver violently. I had reached an end, an inner terminus, that I could not comprehend. My heart was a frozen waste, yet submerged in pain. I wanted desperately to unloose this anguish, to cry, to speak, to touch — but could not. Kate turned to me, aware of my shuddering, and swiftly expressed concern, chafing my hands, ceasing her sobbing — her attention now fixed wholly on myself. Then her arms were around me, warm and consoling — and still I shivered. My teeth were chattering and my hands like ice. She bent to my feet and unlaced my shoes. "You're frozen!" she murmured, and moved away from me towards the door.

A terrible sound rose in my throat, a hoarse, broken cry — "Don't leave me, Kate!" I implored, "don't leave me!" and like an aching torrent, emotion surged through me. I flung myself on the floor, catching her ankles in my hands, prostrating myself, pleading that she stay with me. "It's alright, Alex," I heard her say, "I was only going to get something hot for you. Sit down, it's alright. I won't be a minute."

I lay on the floor in the dark, tears streaming from me — aware of my own ridiculously distraught behaviour, powerless to restrain it, and inwardly beseeching the Teacher repeatedly to help me. Soon Kate returned, with tea and a hot water bottle. "Be still," she said, "and do as I tell you." She compelled me to drink, then to lay on her bed like an obedient child, with the bottle at my feet, shivering still. Covering me with blankets, she sat beside me, quietly stroking my head. Thoughts crowded persistently in my mind, refusing to be dislodged. They all devolved now on the wretched Joel, this boy of twenty to whom she had belonged, who had meant to her what Sophie had meant to me. My mind ricocheted. No — more. More. Far more! What Sophie had meant to Max! "Kate," I whispered beseechingly, gripping her hands fiercely with a resolution beyond my conscious volition, pulling her towards me so that we were face to face — "Tell me about Joel. Please tell me about Joel . . ."

She looked steadily at me, and said, very gently, "I will soon . . ." she paused, as if hesitant, then her words slid slowly through my mind,

charged with a peculiar tenderness — “But first — Alex, oh my love . . . you tell me about Sophie . . .”

The world spun round me; even in the dimness of the room I felt a dizziness. Why Sophie? Why now? I stared at Kate, softly visible, her hair disarrayed and loose, so that she looked much younger — in the confusion of my thoughts . . . even like Sophie. I let go of her hands abruptly. “I can’t talk about her,” I said, “it hurts too much.”

“You told me you had got over her,” she answered, and unexpectedly, she lay down beside me, and cradled me in her arms. My arms went round her at once, in hazy comfort, and my anguish immediately eased. I began to kiss her, softly, lingeringly, gently . . . It was like entering an exquisite dream, a delicate rapture of lost love refound. The tension in me lessened, and my mind, like an unwinding spring, wandered passively back through the years to the blissful yearnings of youth, and the primal need to love utterly, devotedly, to one’s furthest depth. Though dimly I knew it was Kate beside me, she fused with my earliest ideals, and in the semi-subtle state I traversed, I linked her with all the aspirations of young manhood. I called her Sophie . . . feeling a vague surprise that I should do so, and she lay beneath my kisses as still and quietly as a young girl . . .

I said again the things I’d said to Sophie at the beginning — the things stored up from boyhood, from the dreams of that one woman I would one day meet and marry. I did not pause to think how strange it was, how incongruous for Kate — I thought of nothing outside my need to express this tenderness, the sweetness of such love in all its fullness, and she clung to me as she would have done at sixteen, shy and timid, yet deeply and overwhelmingly my own. Her face was streaming with tears, and they mingled with mine, and the words she said were soft, gentle words, imbued with the age-old tenderness of woman.

And suddenly I *knew* she was Kate, and I was *here*, holding her close in my arms, loving and being loved . . . A wave of intense feeling — mentally oriented, ecstatic in origin — pulsed through me, such as I had never known before . . . coming from the very core of me, and mounting in a soaring affinitive joy . . . And at that moment she subtly changed, bringing me back as if from a height, returning my kisses with sudden passion — strongly, fervently, in a way so unexpected, it triggered something in my mind — opposed diametrically to all that had gone before.

A memory obtruded, cast on some inner screen, alarmingly vivid, harshly projected — as if it were happening all over again . . . that night with Sophie, that terrible night; when I knew at last I had lived in a dream; that my years of devoted tenderness and reverent love had all been misplaced . . . As if the valves of memory were opened, and could not again be closed. Terror seized me as I sought to clamp down on the

images that surged for release — but it had gone too far, and I heard in a daze words long buried deep inside me, and saw again that aspect of her I had not known existed. I started back, rigid with shock, and slid from the bed, beginning to shout. But like a record replayed her voice came back to me, still impregnated with forgotten venom — and the loveless words, explicit and direct, drummed mercilessly in my brain. Her lovely face was distorted — she seemed no longer Sophie, this crude, voracious woman, half-stupified with alcohol — strange and erotic, outraged and demanding — fresh from the sensuous tutelage of Max . . . Slamming home her strident, withering view of me. Her long-held view. And brazening her long-term, heartless betrayal.

I raised my hands to my ears, but I could not seal them. The unremitting words were *within* me, cruelly shattering, unescapable - forcing acceptance and recognition. Her image persisted, taunting and defiant — this unknown Sophie, once my wife . . . my woman. Assertively feminist; ‘liberated’; *female*; a total stranger to my heart . . . Who was not; had *never* been . . . could never be, my affinitive love. With sudden unnerving impetus I erupted, emitting vehemently from my depths how she was to me — my language searing and violent. Then I started to retch, and I wanted, desperately, to be sick — to bring out from my innermost parts this residue of torment.

I came to myself again, trembling and cold. Kate was beside me, quietly reassuring; relieving me of my tie, unbuttoning my shirt, removing my trousers — calmly and firmly, like a wife whose husband is sick; and she slipped me into bed in my shirt and trunks, talking softly all the time. Then fetched hot soup and spooned it into me, and another hot bottle, and aspirins, and turned up the heat; and gradually the trembling ceased, and the tension ebbed away.

She sat by my side, stroking my hair in the darkness, and after a time, made as if to leave. Apprehensively I reached for her hand, and said “Stay with me — please Kate — don’t go yet.” To my dismay she stood up, and then I saw that she was removing her skirt and shoes, and she lay beside me in her underslip and blouse, holding my head in her arms, my arms clasped around her. I clung to her, growing drowsy with the warmth, and the feeling of safety that crept over me . . . and very soon I slept.

Much later I awoke, and lay quietly registering what had happened, and how I had behaved. The fire still glowed, but it was not yet dawn. Kate had turned herself, and her back was towards me — but we were close, and I was deeply comforted to find her there. She must have felt me move, for she stirred, then said sleepily — “Are you awake, Alex?”

“Yes, just about” I answered, and found her hand and pressed it.
“Feeling any better?”

"Much better — thanks to you . . . " I wasn't sure what to say to her, and compromised by kissing the back of her neck, but gently, so that she wouldn't think I was taking liberties.

"Sleep again," she murmured, "it's early yet."

"After I've been to the bathroom," I replied, "I'm sorry, Kate, to wake you." A sound like muffled laughter emerged from the blankets. "Don't worry," she said, "I never sleep for long at a time anyway; but put your coat on — this house is cold and damp — you mustn't get chilled after so much heat." Her voice was amused, and soft with sleep. "I sound like your mother!"

I climbed out of bed over Kate, who lay on the outside, and found to my relief my legs weren't shaking any more. I pulled on my coat. She was right, the house was an icebox, and water perspired on the bathroom walls, and stood in beaded globules on the emulsion in the kitchen. Condensation and rising damp, I thought automatically. But the sharp chill was reviving. I splashed my face with cold water; plugged in the kettle and called "How about tea?" and heard the drowsy response in the affirmative. With surprise I registered my clear state of mind and increasing sense of wellbeing. A few minutes later I took in the teatray, and we sat in bed drinking, the darkness concealing our dishevelment — creating a naturalness which to me was pure balm.

"It was good of you to share your bed," I said, as I moved down again into its warmth.

"I hadn't much choice, had I? I couldn't very well send you home like that . . . " The memory was sobering.

"What happened to me, Kate? Do you know?"

"Perhaps you had blocked some painful memories. You can live with them for ages, forgetting they're there, and then some situation sparks them off and they force their way out like an active volcano! I've known it to happen before."

"With Joel?" I said softly, suddenly sure — "Yes, with Joel," she agreed, "and with Sergei. They both mixed me up with someone else. It was very traumatic."

"Poor Kate," I whispered. "Forgive me. It must have been horrible."

"Oh no," she said, "some of it was very beautiful — now try to sleep and we'll talk in the morning."

We lay holding hands; then swiftly she kissed my nose, and turned away from me, and I knew quite well she was keeping me carefully at arm's length, and might even feel nervous. The urge to hold her to me was intense, but I did not move. "I take it you're not scared of me?" I said quietly.

"No," she answered lightly, "but be careful, or I might be!" I reined my

thoughts and eased my back towards hers — I hardly dare touch her, aware as I was that she was fire to dry tinder, and that our situation was brought about by other than ourselves. Oddly, I drifted smoothly into slumber, relaxed by the warmth and an underlying mental serenity. When next I surfaced, Kate had gone, and light crept greyly through the curtains. I smiled ruefully to myself. She was taking no chances. But then I could hardly expect her to. When I had kissed her, I had called her Sophie.

A little later she came into the room, dressed and made-up, and suggesting breakfast. Feeling much more at ease I departed to wash, soon cursing my lack of a razor, but little could disturb my persistent feeling of cheerfulness for long. We breakfasted in the sitting room, with the fire burning brightly, and the soft hiss of rain on the windowpanes. I smiled wryly at Kate, who was behaving as if nothing untoward had happened. "You've no idea how good this is," I said, reaching for the marmalade — "there's no doubt at all I'm the marrying type!" Her eyes met mine for an instant as she smiled back at me, and for a brief while we relapsed into the warm intimacy of our holiday together.

It was a grey, dismal day, ideal for talking. The falling rain enhanced the fact we were alone — as if enclosed on an island, and the world outside seemed far away. I told Kate of my dream of herself and Joanna, to which she listened intently. "I suppose the explanation I was given concerned aversion and repression — as was indicated last night!" The recollection was less embarrassing than I would formerly have believed possible.

"It would seem so," Kate replied, "though it could mean much more than that. It was obviously necessary for you to release yourself from locked up memories — they tend to colour all our reactions quite unconsciously, and are very good at ruining relationships — including those that are nothing to do with the original hurt! But you aren't really a complex person, Alex, and your difficulties were rooted more in shock and disillusionment than anything else. Surely such stress wouldn't be placed on a single incident — not that I'm in any way belittling it," she added hastily, "but there could be something further, more profound . . ."

"You mean outside the personal psychology altogether?"

"Perhaps. You've had your conditioning 'tapped' and shattered, but don't misunderstand — this isn't like the correction of an actual malfunction. You can't compare it to an over-ripe ego! It happens to all of us at some point, in different ways, and any damaged parts are excised and healed, making things possible which couldn't otherwise occur. The explanation would have contained that, of course, but it could be part of a much wider working — maybe to do with understanding on a different level entirely. A teacher doesn't explain to no purpose, and if I'm right, he'll make sure you register his meaning all along the line, when the time is appropriate."

I saw this could be so. Events and situations had risen consistently from seemingly nowhere, and I had already at times been made aware that they were manipulated, as if someone behind the scenes determined certain impacts set before me in advance.

Kate sat watching me, and suddenly remarked — “You don’t seem so worried today about Joel.”

“True! I’m still curious, and jealous too without doubt! But it doesn’t trouble me as it did before. I wonder why?”

“That’s easy,” she said, laughing — “it’s because your vision has cleared, and you know now intuitively he isn’t a barrier between us.” As she spoke, I recognised the truth of this, without understanding it factually.

“Suppose you tell me about him now, and then we can put the past behind us where it belongs . . .”

She sighed softly. “It isn’t easy” she said, and slipped into a reverie. It was very still in the room. The light patter of rain and the tick of the clock were the only sounds audible. I could see Kate was thinking deeply, trying no doubt to sort out what to say. I touched her gently. “You don’t have to speak about it at all if it distresses you — it doesn’t really matter any more.”

She looked quickly up at me. “Oh, I want to,” she said gravely, “I’ve wanted to all along. But I couldn’t bear to see your reactions. I love you so very much, Alex.” I drew her to me and kissed her, surprised and affected by her admission, but she soon moved away again, to her former place, and sat looking into the fire. I remembered then what I’d intended to ask her last night. “Kate, why did you cry so? You still haven’t told me.”

“I’ll tell you later . . . let’s get this over first.” I’d assumed she’d been upset about Joanna — but perhaps her hurts were deeper and more personal. We both needed to exchange reassurances, to come close to each other with a clear route ahead, uncluttered by long-gone events. But first must come Joel — for her sake too, as was apparent by her nervousness. In a few minutes she said, “I’ll tell you briefly, because words can’t communicate subtle or occult factors, nor convey experience — and I have a feeling that before long you’ll understand anyway what I’d like to express to you . . .

“I saw Joel in sleep before I met him. My former teacher pointed him out, and showed me a situation in which he wished me to involve myself. I had no idea what he meant, but through a series of similar insights, grasped suddenly that someone was approaching me through time, with whom I must share my life. This perception distressed me — shocked me, in fact. At first I couldn’t credit it — I wanted only to wait for my teacher’s return to England — to be part of his work, and nothing else mattered save the welfare of my children. Patrick and I had already been torn apart, and my parents had disowned me for the same reasons. I was desperately

lonely, and had recently moved to a rented cottage in a part of the country previously unknown to me. It was here I met Joel — or rather his family, in the very first week I arrived there. I didn't realise their significance of course — my mind was on other matters. Apart from the scrape to live, I was hoping still for things to happen which in fact belonged way in the future — time is the most difficult factor to assess — though it was better for me not to know how long I must wait . . .

"Joel was on sabbatical leave from University. It was known he had a problem, but no-one knew what it was. His chaplain, whom I spoke to later, several times — arranged his leave personally. He knew Joel had undergone a powerful mystical experience, which had left him slightly disoriented, but there was an 'X' factor he couldn't place, and he knew he lived in a fantasy world. Joel was very fortunate in one respect — he was given special consideration because of his mental brilliance. Ironically I met him through his mother — she was deeply troubled and asked me if I would see him and try to help — she knew I had some psychic ability because I'd already perceived her other problems . . . When I first saw him, he looked like a young Greek God, fair and tanned and blue-eyed, but oh, so locked in. He could express no emotion at all, and was like someone frozen.

"To put it briefly, I nursed him for nine months through what appeared to be a semi-breakdown, but quite early on, through a series of dreams and events, I learned the essence of his problem, and he expressed it to me himself, most movingly, later — through the impetus of the Teacher, as it moved in you last night . . . but in a different form entirely." She stopped, her face strained and taut.

"It's so hard even to give you an idea, this way — " she said. "My heart is free as a woman, as you must realise already — yet still I love him, and Sergei, and Patrick, just as I love my children and grandchildren — and to bring out all their wounded places, and the dire effects they had on myself, still seems disloyal — and yet it can't be left altogether.

"When I was thirty-seven — two years before the time I'm speaking of — I knew nothing of psychology in the way I do now. I had studied Gurdjieff's system, and knew a little of Jung, but my knowledge of human tendencies and behaviour was exceedingly limited. My life had been sheltered and secluded, almost purdah-like, and I didn't know such things as sexual deviation existed — a homosexual for instance was non-existent as far as I was concerned (no, he wasn't — don't think that! I'm not mentioning it for that reason) — I even became involved with a small group of them and talked about aspiration and the Teacher's work, without having any understanding until later of what I was about. I had the idiotic idea I was handling man rather well!" She paused and we both

laughed, which broke the tension she obviously felt — and indeed it was quite funny to imagine her efforts in such a circumstance, and her bland assumptions of controlling the masculine element with casual ease and dexterity.

“The point I want to make,” she said, “is that to be presented with a complex being like Joel in my almost total ignorance, was only possible through my inner awareness of his subtle state. Also, *had* I known about these others, and even Joel (for quite different reasons) in advance, I would never have dared go near them, simply because I wouldn’t have understood them, or known how to approach or help them. Therefore I was led in ignorance — and I can see now *why*. *Because* I had no pre-conceived notions or conditioning, I acted towards each of them solely as my intuition dictated — with some rather strange results which I’ll tell you of sometime.

“Joel had withdrawn from life believing himself a misfit; he felt he was a feminine soul trapped in the body of a man. He wasn’t, of course, but he *thought* he was, with all the suffering this involves. In reality, his inner development was lopsided — through an indrawn polarisation in the subtle body, instead of the physical, and a psychology damaged through childhood experience, plus whatever he’d brought with him at birth. He was a hyper-sensitive child, taken too soon from his parents, who lived abroad, for the prep. and public school existence which so often breaks this type of child. But don’t misunderstand me — there was nothing effeminate about him — he was very masculine, with a masculine mind, and masculine abilities — but a feminine psychology, if you see what I mean. It sometimes happens to aspirants when they expand the intuitive faculties, and is nothing whatever to do with the gross counterpart, the recognised psychological deviations, with which they can be sadly confused.

“He had told no-one of his conflict, save myself — his attitudes seemed mystically based, and quite soon he had a vivid dream that he was with Chaitana, the great Indian Master, practising the Madhura Bhava as Ramakrishna did, or something similar — an ancient spiritual discipline in which the male aspirant expresses his feminine aspect — a form of ecstatic God-intoxication — debased now of course, like everything else passed down to us.

“Joel was a natural Yogi, and could perform all thirty-two asanas with ease and without tuition. For him, Raja Yoga was effortless, and he was able to sustain the most complex mental exercises. He registered contact with the Teacher in sleep, and was aware of instruction, and he’d also come into indirect contact with Shah before we met — in fact, it was Joel who led me to him in outer life . . .” She shook her head as I made to interrupt her, not wishing to break off at this point, and continued,

"Monasticism appealed to him, and he stayed for a short while at an Abbey, and also an Ashram, and once thought seriously of becoming a monk. For weeks at a time throughout our relationship, he would undertake austerities — always involving celibacy, and in every sense was a most unusual and intuitive person. Joanna, naturally, knew nothing of this, nor did she meet him during our first four years together." I caught her fingers in mine, and pressed her hand in mute apology — for I grasped already how misled I'd been.

"Where was this place you met him, Kate?"

"Glastonbury," she said, "in Somerset."

"The place with all the hills and the famous Tor, which some people regard as a kind of Mecca — a sacred city of the past?"

"The same. But his parents weren't aware of that — they had simply taken a house there for a year, for other conveniences, before going abroad again. But the significance wasn't lost on him or me. However, I don't think it's been used for a very long time for transmission purposes — people merely plug-in to potencies left over from former periods, including those that are undesirable . . . Perhaps one day this will all be changed . . ." I saw I had side-tracked her. "Return to Joel!" I commanded, and she laughed and relaxed noticeably, returning obediently as asked.

"Well, we formed a close comradeship, and for many months he was emotionally dependent, and hardly let me out of his sight — not through jealousy or possessiveness, just his own need. We cared deeply for each other, and I had realised very quickly there was no possibility of him becoming involved with a girl of his own age — he was too shy of them, and one who had pursued him and proffered herself got nowhere! He was too far away from life, too scared and introspective and locked in. And even when I managed to partially release him — there was no hope for him of marriage — his psychology was still too damaged — wounded perhaps is a better word, and too indrawn — no young girl could hope to understand him, even if she could catch him!

"But he wasn't concerned with making other relationships, and asked me repeatedly to marry him, which I did, eventually, despite the age-barrier — when I was told by his doctor it was the very best thing I could do for him, and would give him the emotional security he lacked. Also because I'd lost everything else, save my children, and with Joel I was still of some value, some use. But I had misgivings, many of them. I knew I would lose my independence, and he would become responsible for me in illness etc. which worried me — and that his family wouldn't accept me — they had already cut him off very cruelly because he wouldn't leave me, though I'd tried for this reason to induce him to, without any success. Primarily . . . it was because I believed the Teacher required it of me — it

set a necessary seal on our relationship. Indeed, that very same month I visited Shah, by his invitation, much as you did . . . by then I'd been in written contact about a year."

She hadn't mentioned this before, and I found it surprising, for I understood its relevance in her particular situation; but this time I refrained from interrupting.

"I don't propose to give you a sob-story," she said. "It was hellishly hard at times, but there were good moments. I worked a seven day week for much of the time, and eventually Joel went back to University and took his Degree. Money was practically non-existent, there was nothing left after the struggle to live. We moved around in various rented houses, and I took whatever work was currently available. My son lived with us, and at one time my daughter, and later, Joel's sister. But as he drew nearer to life, and more normal, his own masculinity increased. He hadn't been interested in women as such, not at that time anyway — rather in an image of woman . . . but soon he had an affair, very brief, with a girl his own age, and felt both jubilant and guilty about it — jubilant because he'd sipped the heady wine of youth, and entered fully into life again with his own contemporaries, and guilty because he cared for me, and didn't wish to hurt me. He withdrew from the girl rather than wreck our relationship — he still couldn't bear to — but I knew nevertheless it was meaningful. I understood my time with him was closing — we'd spent over five years together, and his state had changed considerably. I knew in due time he would need the experience of fatherhood — he'd dimly sensed it himself . . . and I grieved because I saw I must let him go from my life, even as I'd let him come into it.

"As for Sergei, I went from one extreme to another. I had known him many years as an acquaintance — he attended two of the earliest groups taken by my former teacher, and in fact knew him quite well professionally, as a fellow-designer in Electronics. Long after the entire situation had broken up, he became friendly with Joanna, and through her met Adrian — and much later myself and Joel. We visited each other's homes and talked together quite often. When Joel got into debt (he was hopeless with money) and went off to work in London — Sergei was extremely kind and sympathetic, and seemed to understand how I felt. I didn't know then he'd had a former marriage, when young, to a woman twenty years his senior whom he'd adored . . . and turned away from five years afterwards, for reasons similar to Joel's — or so he thought. He'd experienced much personal unhappiness with Anna, and had suffered greatly during his early life in both Russia and Germany . . .

"He was thirteen years older than I, and far worldlier and more mature in every sense than Patrick or Joel. He was tender with me, and

considerate, courteous and cultured — oh, such balm to a woman who had struggled for too long to be both man and woman in one! Anna objected strongly to his attentiveness, and soon banned me from their home — though I didn't realise this at the time, being wrapped up in worry over money, and misery over Joel. I didn't grasp at first how Sergei felt about me — but others were already aware of it — Joanna for instance.

"Joel and I now decided to separate. He'd taken a teaching post at a top public school, and I just couldn't face the life he expected me to lead . . . I knew I would never fit in, and I was shown inwardly a quite different situation and many factors concerning it — and understood, very sadly, it was time for Joel to go on alone.

"I found work in a geriatric home, with my own tiny attic flatlet; and Sergei began visiting me, and phoned at every opportunity. His health was already poor, and declined rapidly under increased domestic pressures, even to the point of collapse. He arranged to move in with Joanna, who had offered a room and was sympathetic about Anna's rages, but he got cold feet about it right at the last, and the end result was he stayed with me instead. He had already told me he'd 'killed' his own sexuality, and I understood he'd repressed it as a spiritual discipline — though I suspected his aversion to Anna had been contributory. But he hadn't been altogether honest, his heart was failing, and he'd simply spent himself out. It didn't trouble me then. I had seen I was linked to him, and I knew it was intended I should journey with him awhile. It was bliss to be looked after, considered, loved — and he was very romantic, or so I thought. In fact, I was looking after myself, as always, and him too, but no-one had ever pampered me before.

"We found a small cottage, I left my job, and he retired at once, through his heart, in order to paint and do all the things he could never do with Anna. He poured himself into painting. It lasted a month. During that time, Anna withdrew all his savings from their joint account, demanded the house in her name, a massive maintenance, and changed all the doorlocks so that he couldn't take even his books, and he was so overwrought with anxiety over what he would lose materially that he had a further, and major, nervous collapse, followed by clinical depression. And instead of a loving co-partner — I had a crotchety semi-invalid on my hands, who again, couldn't bear me out of his sight, and expected me to supply all his needs and keep him comfortable and amused. He was in and out of hospital — saw psychiatrists and social workers . . . and there was also a fearful undertone of occult pressure - " I looked up sharply; her face was tense, but she smiled rather wanly at me. "You don't really suppose all I've told you was just as it stands, do you?" she said — "It wasn't simply an oscillation between two love relationships — there were

far deeper factors at work, involving every individual linked with at the time." She moved quietly forward to sit on the hearthrug, nearer the fire.

"In the end, I too, was ill, and he left me, fearing I could no longer look after him, and he would be more secure at home. In order to bring this about, and regain Anna's co-operation . . . in effect, he scuppered his own ship, a very dangerous thing to do. And before he went, the recurring occult patterns which had underlain events . . . right from the time I was with my first Teacher . . . began suddenly to climax; and I learned then the spiritual reasons for all that had happened in the past."

It seemed to me she suddenly switched levels here, for she continued; "You must remember in all this, Alex, that I was learning all the time. There were so many moves, so many people, so many incidents — I can't hope to communicate them in one conversation. And apart from anything else, my own inner awareness, which had reached a peak in 1964 — was required to 'come down', or descend — at any rate to stabilise — I could not otherwise have lived a normal life. And the sheer necessity to work, and to concentrate on the needs of others, compelled me to do this."

I bent forward and put my arms about her, and suddenly she leaned her head on my knee and sighed. "It sounds crazy, doesn't it," she said, "all my early efforts to become free, and I got more and more bound. But at the end, in the March of 1977, I had a major cosmical experience in full waking consciousness, which lasted some days. It coincided with the time I severed *all* my past connections, in fact was the reason for it — and I returned during the first few days from its commencement, to this house. The impact was so powerful, I nearly lost my hold on life itself, and my son looked after me. Someday I'll tell you about it.

"Since then I've been as you found me, living quietly, writing and studying — buying and selling bits and pieces, and getting myself together again."

I pulled her closer to me; and ignoring the factors she was most obviously unwilling as yet to talk about, I said gently, "It doesn't sound to me in the least as Joanna presented it. I think you had a rotten time all round, and whatever others may have thought, it must have been far from sexually fulfilling — in fact quite the reverse."

"You're so right," she smiled ruefully, "but the irony of it all was that I got the regulation treatment for 'scarlet women' from my mother and her friends, and jealous envy from the younger women I knew. It's extraordinary how differently people can see the same person — it makes one feel like some kind of chameleon! Patrick thought I was practically sexless. Joel wasn't concerned with any needs outside his own, but others assumed my life with him was one long orgy and tended to treat me accordingly. And Sergei considered me full of unrequited passion, and

was afraid to expose me to temptation with other men. He imagined my relationship with Joel had a parallel with his own first marriage, which was a very torrid affair. Nothing could be further from the truth, but I could never convince him of this — and largely through his own disabilities, he smouldered continually with jealousy. I just couldn't win!" Her face was pensive.

"And what are you really like, Kate?"

She laughed and said, "I'm not sure. I haven't yet been presented with the right kind of situation in which to find out — or the right kind of man."

I gripped her hand and she looked up at me, our eyes meeting. "Dear Kate . . . last night I behaved like an idealistic schoolboy — but I'm not fundamentally so hopeless . . . nor entirely insensitive to what I exposed you to . . ."

"I'm aware of that" she said softly. "I know what kind of man you are."

"How do you know? You haven't much to go on so far — you only know the kind of chap I've been! Incurably romantic, idealistic to the point of unreality, and undeniably Victorian!"

"That was obvious — but I was like that too. And I still find the concept delightful. My girlhood's dream was of dancing in a frilled white dress with a handsome officer; gallant, sensitive, honourable, brave — and of course, completely innocent! Not ignorant, that would have made it impossible — but very highly principled — and belonging just to each other and nobody else!"

"What a blissful thought — we should have met years ago! I think you were just as bad as me, Kate."

"I'm certain I was." Her eyes were suddenly serious. "It shattered me to find that I was by no means Patrick's first love. I discovered this two months before my wedding day, and nothing was the same afterwards. I felt betrayed, which was absolutely ridiculous."

"Yet you still went ahead . . ."

"Oh yes, I didn't stop loving him — I couldn't just switch it off, nor face the family reactions if I tried to back out or delay things. But it was a terrible shock — I really needed time to adjust my reactions. I'd been reared to anticipate the perfect, virginal marriage from childhood, and had assumed his concepts were the same. I didn't know what to do with my numbed emotions . . . and they weren't casual relationships either, but affairs of some duration. The one that upset me most was with the girl he had been engaged to, and had never told me about. And a few weeks after we married he felt he had to confess there were many more — of the other kind — and also some of the circumstances, which were very sordid. I hadn't got over the first revelation, and I couldn't bear to think about it. It was too late to go back then, and I was still only nineteen. It left a kind

of emotional block, and without any doubt damaged my possibilities of response. I expect people would think it all too silly for words today."

"My poor Kate," I said feelingly, knowing full well how it must have seemed to her.

"I was blind," she remarked, "the product of parental conditioning and Victorian novels — which was mostly good in itself — but I didn't realise that Patrick for instance hadn't been so fortunate in many respects. He was exposed to quite different impacts, and also the horrors and uncertainties of war. He was really a very nice person; if he'd had your background, he may well have behaved differently. But I think there was a similarity in our experiences in that we both 'buried' the effects of shock to our own detriment. When you found out that Sophie wasn't as you believed, you couldn't stop caring either, but it affected you deeply, and like me, in order to continue at all you screened it from your mind — and after a while, forgot it altogether. But nevertheless, subconsciously it coloured your reactions, and built artificial safety barriers in your psychology which were becoming a handicap. We are never allowed to keep them!"

I saw what she meant. "At the time, though, Kate, I couldn't do anything else — I remember the mechanics of it now. I think I knew intuitively for months beforehand that she'd involved herself with another man — one who had shown her a form of loving quite different to mine, which suited her temperament. I didn't know consciously — not for a year, and even then I couldn't believe it. I must have lived in cloud-cuckoo land. In retrospect I'm amazed at my own lack of perception."

"You mean she was having an affair with Max for many months?"

"Oh yes, for more than a year before I knew. That's what hurt so much. It offended me inwardly as well as outwardly. And then for nearly a year afterwards, when I behaved as if she'd never told me! She simply said next morning that it had all been an exaggeration — she had drunk too much, and she apologised. That was all. We didn't mention it again — she was just the same as always — as if that night had been a dream. Strange, isn't it, what the mind can do? I expect she found it hard to break up *her* life, too. I deluded myself it was over — that she'd stopped seeing whoever it was."

"Didn't you know it was Max?"

"Not till the end — she didn't tell me his name. I assumed it was someone she'd met through her job. Had I known it was Max, I'd have hit the ceiling. I certainly couldn't have gone on seeing him, and things would have come to a head straight away, of that I'm positive. On the other hand I'm sure I knew intuitively — I simply bought myself time to withstand the shock of self-knowledge and disillusionment. When it all eventually exploded, I was like someone bereaved. I still hadn't faced up at all to its inevitability, or even the fact I couldn't respect her any more for so deceiving me."

"You aren't distressed now? You're not still grieved about her?" She looked anxiously at me.

"Good God no, Kate — I want *you*, not Sophie," and then, remembering last evening — "Though I called you by her name, it was to do with projecting a dream, not with Sophie herself . . . for heavens sake don't think *that*." She stared down at the carpet.

"I don't really. It wasn't for that reason I asked — just for a purely feminine need of reassurance."

I drew her into my arms, and embraced her with such depth of feeling it should have put her mind at rest completely. I understood now, or thought I did, her feelings of inadequacy. In whatever she had told me, I knew beyond doubt it merely scraped the surface, and the reality had been a great deal more harrowing. I wondered what she had gone through in its entirety. And why it had been required of her. But I drowned these thoughts in fervent kisses, until she suddenly disentangled herself and asked, apparently spontaneously, about the house, suggesting I take her to see it. For a curious moment I felt she had done this deliberately to break the intimacy of our contact — then assumed myself mistaken, for her interest was obviously unfeigned.

Reluctantly I released her. We looked at each other as if slightly inebriated, and I knew that she knew of the raging clamour within me denying restraint. I saw she was laughing at me — but it was the laughter of delight — of mutual happiness. I closed my eyes and inbreathed deeply, my senses swirling in a kind of ecstasy. "Come *on*" she said, "Get up!" She tugged at my hands. A strange heat was spiralling through me, vibrating along my spine. "Oh, Kate," I whispered, "I love you, love you, so much."

"Up!" she repeated, "Open your eyes and get *up*!" I opened them, yielding to the inevitable and laughing with her, and the expanding sensations quietly subsided. "But lunch *first*!" I asserted; and we went somewhere quiet, and found our prolonged talk had given us both good appetites. Then we went to the house. We couldn't get in, naturally, though I tried various means, so we peered through the windows and looked over the rain-soaked garden. It had definite possibilities, and could be transformed, with ingenuity, into a gracious home. Kate liked it, and made so many suggestions I was tempted there and then to ask her to share it with me — but I knew somehow it wasn't the time.

We spent a companionable day together, recapturing the joyous mood of our days in Scotland, and I returned home that evening feeling infinitely better than when I'd set out. I was working that Sunday, having an early appointment in Cromer, accepted principally to oblige Dave in his current phase of benevolence. In the evening I read awhile, and before

going to bed, thought over carefully all that had happened during the previous two days. I had the disturbing impression an acceleration had taken place, and that Shah was moving me around most meaningfully, like a pawn in a game of chess.

The following morning Dave called me into his office, and the outer world suddenly caught up with me. He greeted me with the air of a man about to bestow a great gift, at no small cost to himself; a certain nobility in his bearing — but a tension underneath, like a coiled spring, denoting his uncertainty.

"Relax, boy!" he commanded breezily, waving a sheaf of papers in my direction, "The news is good!"

I sat down, and we smiled warily at each other. He ripped open a new pack of cigarettes. Without preamble he said, "I've a proposition to make to you! One I'm certain you're going to like." His expression was bland and reassuring. "You're aware, of course, that Matt's off to Canada and we've big things lined up there." He paused, and lit-up a fresh cigarette, inhaling deeply and gesturing expansively. "The Company's doing fabulously! The new branch is heavily contracted before we officially open it, and will soon attract other business — we've already gleaned the advance potential. It means increased prosperity for all of us — but particularly for those in right at the beginning!" He puffed smoke vigorously and leaned back in his chair.

"We've been friends a long time now, Alex, and I'd like to include you in on it. No ill-feelings about the past! Literally boy, the sky's the limit. The scope is absolutely boundless!" His tone held a barely suppressed excitement.

I looked suitably impressed, but felt exceedingly cautious. Dave's enthusiasm and overloaded charm denoted beyond doubt some requirement of me — my mind raced through possibilities, and I deduced the most likely was that he wished to create more freedom for himself, and promote me in Matthew's stead. He eyed me speculatively — "Naturally, we're taking on Canadian staff. Everything's laid on well ahead of schedule. But I'll need people I know and trust to run things until it all shapes up and we're sure of the new men we shall employ . . ." He paused again, and drew swiftly on the reddening cigarette.

"Matt's work's cut out on site supervision — he's taking Drysdale, and later, Blunthell and Duff. I was thinking now of moving Phillips in with Luke, and offering you the Canadian office — senior partner — complete charge! How about that?"

I sat motionless without answering. That this would be his suggestion had never once crossed my mind. After our last dispute, I thought he had grasped beyond any doubt that I didn't wish to go abroad again.

"My dear chap," I said slowly — "I fully appreciate the opportunity you're offering me — and it really is good of you, Dave . . . but I didn't expect it, and feel a bit stunned." He gazed steadily at me, as if willing me to make the required reply.

"Superb as the promotion is . . . I regret, truly, that I can't take it — my current involvements would make it impractical — " my mind ticked over rapidly for valid excuses — "also, it's a major change all round, and I don't think physically I'm quite up to it."

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed, "you're looking much better, and you seem to have stopped having all this time off for sickness — I expect you've got over your run of bad luck!" He smiled genially, ignoring my assertions. "No need to be nervous, Alex! You're tip-top at your job. It's just taken you by surprise. Think about it for a day or two and see me then." This magnanimity, though rather forced, was Dave at his best, and I felt more than reluctant to offend him.

"I don't need to think about it, Dave," I replied apologetically, "nor do I wish to be difficult — or waste your time. I just know it's not right for me — not what I want just now," I finished lamely.

"Hell, man — what *do* you want? I'm offering you the moon career-wise!" He began to look ruffled.

"I realise that, and it's not lack of appreciation on my part I assure you — I wish I could get you to understand. But I don't really *want* to go abroad again. You know my feelings already on that score."

He seemed determined to force the issue. "It's all arranged, Alex, and this time it's different, I promise you — no tropical heat, no flies, no riots! The epitome of civilisation! I'll increase your salary of course, and very substantially. You know you're the most experienced man we have. Think of it, a two year tour of a magnificent country! Most men would give their teeth for it! I wish I were free to do it myself, but I can't leave this end of the business."

"Dave!" I said vehemently, "we've had all this before. Don't you grasp it yet? I just don't want to leave England! There are factors here of great importance to me."

He grinned, straining himself to the utmost to be pleasant. "If it's this woman I hear you're seeing so much of — why not take her with you? Marry her if she's free — and if not, abduct her!" He added, as a swift afterthought, "I'll even provide you with a house!"

I smiled ruefully; "There's nothing I'd like better, but that's not the point. She wouldn't leave England either at the moment. We have another commitment, Dave, one I don't wish to talk about, but in one sense it makes no difference anyway. I'll continue working for you, gladly, but it has to be *here*, in this country, not abroad — however decent the

climate or civilised the people!" He made to interrupt me, but I continued firmly — "Not if you offer me five times the salary! Do you hear me? I am absolutely serious, and I mean every word."

He looked rather taken aback, but Dave wasn't used to insurmountable obstacles. Sooner or later, everyone bent to his will. I saw with dismay that he really *had* made all the arrangements, banking on his ace card, that this would be temptingly beneficial to me — no possible equation with Egypt or indeed anywhere East. Painfully, too, I saw he meant it as a tribute, a kind of olive branch — the only type he knew, that had two flowering ends to it — one for the receiver, the other for the giver.

"Oh Dave," I said wearily — "You shouldn't have gone this far without consulting me. Whatever your intentions, however considerate of me, I could have told you at any time it wasn't on."

He saw that I meant it; but now he too, was in difficulty. Someone must go. He launched into a full-powered tirade designed to persuade me — he chided, explained, pleaded, cajoled, and finally coerced. My patience snapped. The man couldn't take no for an answer. I stood up.

"Dave, I'm sorry and all the rest of it. I truly am, but do I really have to keep spelling it out? I'm *not* . . . bloody . . . going! There are reasons, entirely personal, why I *cannot* go — not now, or in the foreseeable future. Much as I value your friendship, and appreciate the opportunity you're presenting me with — my decision *has* to be *No*. And that's final!"

He got to his feet, his face working and gradually suffusing with red. "Right then!" he said at last — "That's twice you've let me down. Either you work for me or you don't. And if you do, you go where I tell you!"

"I will not go to Canada."

"O.K. Alex. On your own head be it. I'm giving you three months notice as from *now*." His hands were clenched with rage, and he walked over to the window, willing himself no doubt to contain the stream of fury that crimsoned his features.

"As you wish, Dave." I said, and turned on my heel, leaving speedily for my office to hide the trembling in my legs that threatened to undo me. I rammed down my feelings, stoppered my thoughts, and worked consistently through a mass of paperwork, feeling myself, after an hour or so, begin to wind down.

I knew Dave would repent his anger. A good man, fully trained and reliable, was not so readily to be dispensed with. But he was proud, and despite his rough *bon homie* with us all, he was the boss, and liked us all to know it. Insubordination was unacceptable, the characteristic of betrayal. And to Dave, a man like myself should be fully utilised, placed where most profitable. His soaring bank-balance alone could never satisfy him —

there were always new heights to conquer, fresh fields to challenge, further fortunes to be made. The 'up and comings' could take over most of my job, as I well knew, but he could not yet rely on them sufficiently to do what was already proven in me.

I had stepped out of place, not moved on with the links in the chain. Dave was founding a business empire, but my own ambition was dead; the lure of money and fame could not touch me. Wherever my weaknesses lay, it wasn't here. I no longer cared as I had when we started. And somewhere inside that stubborn, angry frame he knew it, and like all of his kind, would not rest now until this reminder of his own lack of omnipotence had gone from his sight. There would be no change of heart, I realised. No going back. The die had already been cast, and my vague premonitions were now concretised.

I thought hard about my situation that evening. Without doubt something was moving in my life, and shock after shock, both mild and severe, had been administered; all connected, I was sure, with the 'preparation' Shah had made for me. But where was it leading? And here I met a vacuum; I had absolutely no idea. It was all new country, and as yet unsignposted. I could only do as I thought best, and wait. I turned again to "The Way of the Sufi" which I was currently rereading, and soon my eyes alighted on this:

'First of all he came into the inert world. From minerality he developed, into the realm of vegetation. For years he lived thus. Then he passed into an animal state, yet bereft of any memory of his being vegetable — except for his attraction to Spring and to blossoms.

This was something like the innate desire of an infant for its mother's breast. Or like the affinity of disciples for an illustrious guide. When the shadow is no more, they know the *cause* of their attachment to the teacher . . .

From realm to realm man went, reaching his present reasoning, knowledgeable, robust state; forgetting earlier forms of intelligence. So too shall he pass beyond the current form of perception. There are a thousand other forms of Mind . . .

But he has fallen asleep. He will say: 'I had forgotten my fulfilment, ignorant that sleep and fancy were the cause of my sufferings.'

He says: 'My sleeping experiences do not matter.'

Come, leave such asses to their meadow.

Because of necessity, man acquires organs. So, necessitous one, increase your need.'*

* Idries Shah: *The Way of the Sufi*, Octagon Press 1968, pp.249.

The last few lines affected me. Their impact was such that I put the book aside, and leaned back in my chair with closed eyes, turning over in my mind my own experiences. I was not aware of any insight, nor could I sense, or feel the Teacher's presence. Yet intangibly, without any degree of substance, or essence - no attributes whatever, I *knew* beyond question that my life was in his hands — that the events impinged on me, unsought and unsuspected, were part of his intention, and were shaping me inexorably towards an end already fashioned. And consciously now I concurred with that unknown destination. In my deepest recesses I made an avowal — though not as before, amid seeking and searching — but passive in my acceptance of the darkness surrounding me, surrendering in unverbaised resignation, the directive of my life, my power of decision, and right of query. Nothing was there, and nothing answered me — yet in this nothingness was stillness, and a soundless sound. I knew it marked a phase in my inner journey, and abandoning my problems I went straight to bed, and quietly slept.

The morning brought a letter from the Cambridge estate agents, accepting my offer, and I acted upon it almost without thought, sending at once a letter of confirmation, and during the morning, phoning a Norwich agent with a view to selling my flat. Dave nodded abruptly as he passed, and I noted Bell had been summoned from Plymouth, and there was a great furore in the offices.

I was glad to get back on site and away from it all. I supposed I had better start thinking of a new position, but I couldn't yet bring my mind to it. On my arrival home, I found to my pleasure that the second post had brought me a letter from Kent. I opened it quickly and read the few lines it contained. It was from Shah's secretary, thanking me for my letter, and informing me that he had arranged for me to receive materials for further study from the Society for Sufi Studies, when available, as these would be reliable, and, he hoped, useful to me. He sent his best wishes.

I sat at my desk by the window, looking out at the darkening autumnal scene presented by the leafless garden. I hardly knew if I felt pleased or disappointed. Like Kate and her son, it seemed I must wait. Yet not without hope. I was quite certain he did not 'arrange' lightly, or without meaning, and 'useful' used in a Sufi context held its own promise. I made tea and sandwiches, and sat down to write to Kate.

That night I had a rather odd dream, but very vivid, and it carried a peculiar potency. I stood in a small library, with rows of new books on the bottom shelves, and old ones on the top. I was looking for one in particular, and searched carefully on high steps until I found it. It was a very old book, black with age, and as I took it down from the shelf, dust scattered on the floor and I caught its mildewy odour. Then I opened it, and saw

with surprise that the pages inside were almost new, and the coloured frontispiece was a modern print of Eurydice entering the underworld. For some reason this affected me deeply, and I felt strong emotion, and tears rising behind my eyes.

During the week my mind turned repeatedly to what Kate had told me, and on Saturday, when I saw her again, I mentioned several of the things which had risen in my thoughts as a consequence. We had been to look at the house, having collected the key from the agents, and gone minutely through its rooms making plans and envisaging alterations. It was better than I remembered, and I felt extremely pleased, while Kate enthused over previously unnoted details like cupboard space, and rather attractive china doorknobs.

"Referring to Joel," I said, as we sat over tea in her house — "that's if you don't mind, Kate, of course — but did you ever hear if he got his experience of fatherhood?"

"I don't mind at all," she replied, "and yes, he certainly did! We had a two-year separation, then divorced by mutual consent; and as soon as it became absolute, he married a girl from his own background, whom he'd known only briefly. After which he broke all contact, quite understandably, and for four years we heard nothing. But not long ago he wrote from South Africa, where he's now teaching, and asked if he could bring his family to see me — and just before meeting you, Alex, he did . . . and I held his two lovely children, a little boy and baby girl, and got on splendidly with his very nice wife. She writes to me regularly and I'm very fond of her — it was as if we'd met before, and the friendship was already made." I felt rather amused by her attitude.

"What happened to Patrick?" I asked, catching Kate's ringless hand and inspecting it carefully. She watched me enquiringly.

"He remarried, and was fortunate — I met his wife at my daughter's wedding, and thought her very sweet . . . What *are* you doing?" she said.

"Looking to see if you have three husbands — it's supposed to show in the palm!" She withdrew her hand quickly and heaped my plate with sandwiches, doubtless to keep me occupied.

"Strangely enough," she remarked, "my daughter married her son, so we share the same grandchildren — an odd, triangular situation, which I'm sure will puzzle them when they're older! We get on well together and she occasionally phones me, and has even visited — but I don't think she has much of a marriage. Patrick is no better with her than he was with me — and he won't have anything to do with myself at all."

"You never cease to astonish me, Kate," I said, laughing — "it's hilarious to think of their wives confiding in you!"

"Oh, I'm careful what I say," she smiled — "I never comment on the

past — I keep to current events and leave it at that. It's like having sisters. One of life's compensations!"

"And how about Sergei?"

She looked suddenly rather sad. "He died last year, in very unhappy circumstances. Two months after he'd left me — having heard I'd recovered my health, he tried to undo what he'd done, and approached me to remake our relationship. But I knew it wasn't permitted, nor did I wish it, though it was painful emotionally to hear his voice on the phone. I didn't ever see him again. The week prior to his death, nearly eighteen months later, he came to me in sleep and told me he was dying — this was when I was living in Kent, and a few weeks afterwards an acquaintance sent me a newspaper cutting, which confirmed the date. He's tried several times since to make contact, and I know he had many regrets, but as far as I'm concerned, emotionally it's all over."

I had intended to mention the occult pressures she'd formerly referred to, but thought better of it. It didn't seem opportune somehow. I asked instead if she thought I'd ever share her volume of experience, which I realised was infinitely more varied than mine to date. She gazed at me very soberly, and said, "I'm quite sure you will, Alex. You've come on a long journey, and don't know yet where you're going, or where you've come from. Shah will wake you at the proper time and help you to remember. Until then, take it slowly when you can. You think not much is happening, but you're moving at great speed . . . Pause and rest whenever you're given the opportunity. We've a long way to go yet. Our 'time' hasn't yet begun. We're simply moving into position before it commences." Her tone was serious, and quite unlike it had been before — then she switched back disarmingly and offered me more tea, and her delicious home-made cake.

Finally, I asked if Joel and Sergei had shared her Sufic convictions. "Joel did certainly," she said — "It was through him, as I told you, that I first connected with Shah. He already knew several quite eminent people who went to the early groups — I expect they were some of the founder members of the Institute. He himself had the opportunity later to join in, but foolishly declined, though he knew Shah was a teacher — I think because the group offered was in London, and run by other than Shah himself. But it was still a valid, and missed, opportunity."

"As for Sergei — he seemed to stay on the fringe, and didn't make outer contact at all. Yet he had some very profound experiences, and was deeply aware of inner guidance. Both he and Joel had considerable occult knowledge locked-up in themselves — too much, perhaps, for their own comfort." Then she changed the subject, and soon we went out for the evening.

We were extremely happy together, and I was aware of the gradual sense of relaxation that came over us both. We talked of my plans for the house, and I related my interview with Dave, discussing with Kate my work potential for the future. Towards the evening's end, as we sat in the old country inn I had taken her to in the summer, I said suddenly, "Did you see *me* coming, Kate, before we met?"

"Why do you ask?" she parried, smiling.

"Now why do you think! It was inevitable, surely, after what you said about Joel. It's important to me! Did you, Kate?"

She considered, her eyebrows slightly raised, and her expression tantalisingly ingenuous. She knew quite well I found this aspect of her emotionally combustible, and I knew equally well she did it deliberately when she wished to evade direct answers.

"You're maddening, Kate! Now did you? Please! I'm really serious."

"I suppose so. At least I think it was you! I saw this tall, determined man push into my life and cry all over me like a baby."

"Now you're laughing at me!"

"Of course I am, but nevertheless it's true!"

"Is that *all* you saw?"

"No, there were other things, but not all on the same occasion."

"What kind of things?"

"I saw you reading my manuscript, and looking at houses, and coming to see me — oh, and climbing hills, though I didn't know where — but that was a long time ago, before you mentioned Scotland. How about you — have you 'seen' me? Apart from crying, I mean." This was an obvious ploy, a playing for time, but her expression had softened, and I plunged on recklessly.

"I have, as a matter of fact."

"Tell me!"

I paused; one never knew how she would take things, but there was a point I wished to get at — a persistent query in my mind — and I felt she knew the answer . . . if she would only say. We had played this game of pitting our wits before. I had already learned that the indirect route proved the more fruitful. I held her eyes intently.

"I made love to you, Kate."

"You did?" Her eyes expressed astonishment. She was obviously determined to be infuriating.

"Yes; you know what dreams are, insubstantial and fleeting — but this one was very clear, and *not* a wish-fulfilment dream, I can distinguish that kind. It held an other-dimensional element as well, and was *extremely* impactive."

"Oh," she said, "well, it doesn't necessarily follow it was me — we often

clothe the future in current terms."

"Don't you think it's likely to be true?"

"I've no idea," she replied, looking away from me. "It depends on how things go between us. And on destiny."

"I realise that," I said — "but there's something here I don't understand — as you're fully aware, I'm quite certain. Why is this barrier between us Kate? I can't see it or feel it, yet I know it's there."

"Didn't your dream reveal anything more to you — and were there others?"

I felt perplexed. She knew of it without doubt, yet had still evaded my question. "Yes, there was something. It didn't make sense, and I suppose I dismissed it because of this." She waited, without saying anything.

"We were in a beautiful place, with the sea in the background. Lots of people were there that we knew very well; most were friendly, but a few were hostile, though they concealed this in some way — we were all in pairs, and I was with you."

"What's odd about that?"

"That wasn't the one — there was another — we had an office above a television studio, and we co-partnered a script. It was in central London — it went so well we were given our own programme."

"That's a marvellous dream! I'd like to think it could happen, but it's obviously symbolic."

"In another we were both very old, and I saw our tombs side by side carved in a strange kind of rose-coloured granite — it wasn't any place I knew, nor any century I could date. Then we came together again in different bodies, and I saw you as you are today, but I knew we had worked together for a very long time, and accomplished something that I've completely forgotten. The odd bit, and I'm sure you'll laugh — was that I couldn't come to you as a man until I had contacted Shah . . . and I had to walk through a dark, lonely place before I could find him."

She didn't laugh. Her face was quite inscrutable, yet somehow tender.

"We can't interpret these things until they actually happen," she said — "I've seen something similar — about the old couple — but it's useless for us to speculate. It's enough to know the Teacher's *there*, and he'll direct us . . ."

I took her hands and made her look fully at me. "You know, don't you," I said — "You know that it's true, and you know the reasons."

She shook her head at me. "We both know, Alex, and at the same time we don't know. We're not dealing with ordinary man and woman relationships. There are specific reasons for our links, and other things must happen before we can say what they are with certainty. We have to leave it at that." She touched my cheek in a gentle caress. "But if it's any

comfort — I love you deeply, and want to be with you always.”

I felt strangely moved. All the way home in the car we were silent, and a kind of potent intensity gradually increased between us. As we entered the house, I caught her suddenly in my arms and kissed her ardently, passionately — with an overwhelming need to hold her close to me — to cleave together in body, mind and spirit. She looked rather shaken, and I could see, in the dim rosy light of the hall, her eyes were soft with tears. “Let me stay with you tonight Kate.” I murmured into her hair, “Let me make love to you, be close to you — belong with you. I need you so desperately! I can’t envisage life without you — it’s absurd for us to stay apart.” A violent heat burned in my spine, and a longing so pervasive surged through me I could hardly bear it.

She was completely and utterly still, like a little bird caught in a beam of light. “My dearest love,” she said, very gently, “Don’t you realise yet? Don’t you understand? My dear, dear love . . . my Alex . . . my poor darling . . . It’s not as simple as what *I* want or *you* want — that’s not the first criterion . . . We have to *wait* . . . there are reasons and very precise ones. I don’t know all the answers, but I do know *that*. When the right moment comes for us, we shall know . . . beyond all possibility of doubt. But until then . . . oh, my love . . .” she looked tragically at me.

“But *why*, Kate, *why*?” my voice was frantic — “Is it to do with what happened last week?”

“No — that’s finished . . . this is quite different. And there’s more than one reason, of that I’m certain.” She suddenly hugged me with fervour, as if in apology, and covered my face, my eyes, my nose, with swift, light kisses. I responded of course, yet despite myself I held back the onrush of explosive feeling, adhering to the rocklike inner discipline that held me in iron bands.

“Is it because,” I persisted, “beneath this stupendous desire I have for you . . . there’s a strange, soaring ecstasy . . . that rises to my heart — and pulses there . . . as if it strives for consummation *in the heart itself*?” She pressed her lips softly to mine. “It isn’t just physical desire,” she said, “it’s linked to your own development — I’m sure you know that. It has to be carefully regulated — held back, rather than forced forward. You must *wait*, Alex — let this stage pass . . . there’s really no choice — but it won’t be forever!”

I felt like a tuned instrument, poised in skilled hands before the opening chord of a symphony — but the tension was almost unendurable, and in sheer frustration my eyes misted achingly with pressured tears. She kissed them tenderly. “Calm down,” she whispered, and suddenly the torment eased, and my long established self-control reasserted.

Soon she moved slightly away from me. “Tea?”

I felt dazed, but muttered yes. "You needn't go all the way back to-night — " she was looking at me with sympathetic sensitivity — "I've made you a room upstairs for whenever you like to use it, and we can spend tomorrow together, just as we did last week when you stayed here." Her eyes held a mute appeal, a query, that I should understand and accept. There was nothing else to do but yield good humouredly. "Bless you, Kate," I replied, taking a deep breath, and holding her hand as I followed her up the staircase.

She showed me the room in what was formerly her son's flat. It was obviously freshly emulsioned, and with newly acquired furniture — I grasped with a pang of feeling that she had busied herself with it throughout the week. "Do you like it?" she asked. It was mainly white, with touches of pale peach and rose; flowery curtains and a soft blue carpet — the inevitable numdah rug producing a warm and homely effect. I couldn't help smiling with touched amusement. "It expresses you exactly!" I said, "I would always know when you designed a room, Kate!" There were bits of pretty china on the bookcase; a cane chair and cushions. A writing table, a Buddha, a trailing plant. We both saw the funny side of it. "You've got your own set patterns!" I chided her, and we laughed helplessly together. For a few moments we clung in a blissful embrace, then she kissed me warmly, swiftly detached herself, and ran lightly down the stairs to get supper.

Sunday was a leisurely day, and passed all too quickly. We talked a great deal, exchanging thoughts and viewpoints, discussing books we'd read, and music we had loved, and the innumerable mundane incidents of our lives. We visited my house again, and consolidated plans for its improvement — then went for a drive before lunch, and I showed Kate Matt's conversion, and she pointed out to me places where she had lived. We both relaxed, and I even dozed in the afternoon to my shame, but it was all very beneficial, and released the strain and tension that had built-up around us almost without our realising it.

I made no move to renew our former intimacy, recognising, though reluctantly, my own need to wind down. We said goodbye with a restrained depth of emotion, but the barrier was still there, subtly in the background, and I puzzled over it as I took the Norwich road home. Yet I left feeling warmly hopeful, and it stayed with me, overlaying all else. I thought of Kate in all her facets, and I dreamed of her all night.

It was a long week, and rather a miserable one workwise. Dave avoided me, and a certain coolness prevailed in the offices. Something must have been said, though nobody mentioned it outright. There was plenty of site work on hand, and I escaped daily with relief.

In the evenings, as usual, I read, and my nights now took on another

dimension, and were thronged with incredibly lucid dreams. Scene upon scene was presented me; clearly, vividly, and most graphically detailed. It was as though a fount had been unblocked, or a spring released, and the effect was kaleidoscopic. Again and again I was with the Teacher, in differing forms and differing places — and I remembered things I had long ago learned, and it seemed so strange I had forgotten them. They were like truths refound, yet never really lost — simply laid aside for some reason, though what that reason was I couldn't recall.

It seemed I rose above Time, and observed it spread out in all its intricacy, with every conceivable eventuality contained within it. Then later, I was with Shah, and he showed me a route on a screen, like a blown-up map, and charted its landmarks. So much was there, in such profusion . . . I grew afraid. My mind as yet could not grasp such potent implications, and felt almost burnt on waking with its overdose of stimulation. Somewhere within it all I glimpsed a truth so relevant to myself and Kate, it troubled me that I couldn't retain it. But I could not; it was quite beyond me, and I knew she was right in her comment on the future — it was futile to speculate. One could only wait in trust, and accept the impacts set immediately before one. There was a whirring sensation in my throat and in my forehead, and at times an impression of white-hot needles deep in my brain.

Thursday was spent in York, but by Friday night I was home again, and on Saturday, off to Cambridge once more, to see Kate. Lunch was ready when I arrived, and I felt a strong sense of happiness and homecoming. She greeted me rapturously, and my workaday world vanished, and my occult side-effects likewise. While we ate, we talked of our daily affairs, but later, over coffee, I spoke of my deepening experience, and recounted some aspects of the tuition recovered from sleep. Suddenly I remembered something I'd read, and had wished to discuss with her.

"How would you define transmission, Kate, in the Sufi sense?"

She thought for a moment and said, "I believe it's one of those things that's virtually impossible to express in words. An ultra-fine form of high level communication — effected, always, by a Teacher, which contains some kind of organic nutrient that ultimately expands the consciousness."

I pondered this, and agreed. "I've found numerous references to it lately, and given it much thought . . . but it would seem very easy to delude oneself about its reception. Years back I had some personal instances of clairaudience — I don't think I've mentioned them — they weren't particularly significant — and I suspect many people would consider this a transmission . . . the spoken word in a subtle form, either inside or outside the head — which I'm certain is incorrect. Recently I've become aware of another type of communication — a faint vibration

seemingly in the brain, which translates itself into sound, though it's actually soundless — and containing all manner of other-dimensional information . . . but it comes only in sleep, or on the borderline. Perhaps it's similar to this — but in the waking state, and entirely conscious."

"You may well be right," she answered — "the first criterion is to become familiar with a whole octave of supernormal experience. One can know then at once if the contact is subtle or mental in origin — or beyond either. A pure transmission from a very high level could perhaps equate with the 'breath of God' one sometimes reads of — a crystal clear verbalisation which *breathes* into the receptive mind. I may have defined it incorrectly, and my own highest type of registration may not be what is termed a 'Sufi transmission', but whatever its degree, it's unmistakable, and as far from spiritualistic clairaudience as pure silk from coarse cotton, though both can be used constructively."

"Would you consider you've experienced it, Kate?"

"It's possible, though I wouldn't wish to state it categorically for the reasons I've just given; but in the last few years my sleep experiences — such as the one you mention, appear to be moving into my outer self, and the soundless vibration becomes concretised as it externalises. On the rare occasions this happens, one aligns oneself with its intention simultaneously — there seems no possibility of anything else. It's as if the spirit fuses momentarily with the flesh — or the Teacher directly informs it. There's no question here of error. One knows. The sad thing is that others may say exactly the same, with complete sincerity, yet we all mean something different, according to our capacities. So it's better to keep quiet about it."

I could not but concede this, and told her then of the strange sensations resulting from my hyper-active sleep-state. Our conversation was interrupted at its most interesting point by a visitor — a friend of Kate's mother who was enquiring details of her illness. After a bit I made myself scarce, and fetched in more coal, chopped firewood, then sauntered round the somnolent garden. I soon heard sounds of the visitor's departure, and went back to the sittingroom, where I found Kate seated at the table reading a letter.

We had decided already to go out, and I sat by the window to wait for her. A sudden thought struck me as I noticed her rather intent facial expression, which evoked a memory, and I voiced it, remarking casually, "Kate, that night, two weeks ago — when I slept in your bed . . . what made you mention Sophie?"

She looked uncertain, as if for a moment unsure of what I referred to. "Oh *then*?" she replied — "The usual reasons. I wanted to know — just as you did about me."

"It was hardly the best time to ask — was it . . .?" I said haltingly, not

knowing why. I had brought the matter up lightly, without prior consideration, on the spur of the moment . . . I got up again, a curious agitation in my solar plexus.

An impression entered my mind; a previously unconsidered concept, and I stood as if rooted — shocked, unable to believe. I looked at her as she sat at the writing desk, intent apparently on the letter in her hand.

"You *knew*, Kate, didn't you? You knew all about me!" A tense stillness came over her — "Kate, answer me! You *knew* —"

It was a statement rather than a question. Her face blanched, all eyes now — imploring, wounded, beseeching me not to ask. I remembered her descriptions of how others had reacted to her intuitive knowledge, related in her manuscript — and also the 'hammering' given by her teacher. "Kate, my dearest Kate, I'm not *accusing* you. I *need* now to understand . . ."

She was silent, and I could see the rapid pulse in her throat that betrayed her nervousness. I waited, silent also, then at last she said steadily, "Whatever I say can only approximate to the truth. I knew, in one sense, yet in another I didn't know — just as I said last week. Does that make sense to you?"

"I think so — but go on. I need more than that."

"Oh Alex," she cupped her head in her hands, "why does it have to be so *hard*!"

"Don't get so upset! My dear, I'm not angry — just discovering something tremendously important to me —" She looked so distressed that I realised her past experiences of hostility had created a certain fear in her. With an effort I brought my reactions swiftly under control, and drew her to me.

"Come, Kate, try to explain. It will help me —"

She hid her face in my shoulder, and then she faced me, as if our conversation were now inevitable, and she must accept the outcome either way.

"When I asked about Sophie, I knew already, yes! — but only a short while beforehand. I suddenly saw what had happened to you . . . not clairvoyantly — though there was some clairvoyance, but with a sightless perception which brings a certitude. As if one is shown all the knots, and how to untie them . . . yet of course, I can't do anything; it happens through me."

"But what about the lead-up, Kate? Looking back, it's as if you led me all the way. I can see it for myself now."

"But not consciously, Alex — not with aforethought! I just followed the threads which were given me. With one part of my soul I saw — I knew all that ailed you; but Kate, the other part — she simply loved you and wanted to help . . ."

“Try to explain more clearly — please try, Kate.”

I held her to me, and kissed her reassuringly. She was trembling slightly, and I thought suddenly how ridiculous it was that with such a faculty, used with such good intent, she should so fear giving offence. Quietly she said, “It’s as if I’m two facets of the same self, Alex. The non-physical one has foreknowledge, and a seemingly unlimited vision. She holds the reins. I’ve learnt to trust her, for in some curious way she’s at-one with the Teacher. But the other part is *me*, as I told you — the human vehicle, Kate, who hopes and weeps and suffers along with everyone else. She’s linked to this other Self by tenuous threads, and in some ways is simply an instrument, an extension, placed here for a purpose — ” She looked down at her feet, and I glimpsed the memories expressed through her eyes and the taut lines of her face.

“There were years and years of doubts and heartbreak, questioning and fear — but now I . . . *she*, no longer questions - she accepts. When things begin to happen — she sees step by step, but seldom the whole — though it’s dimly in the background if she really needs to look, but it isn’t always possible. I think she’s of more use in the dark, with her own reactions . . . and *she’s* developing too, don’t forget. But she knows, when these trends begin, that they’re predestined, and will lead to required and specific results, or are intended to. Sometimes I think that individuals defeat them . . . but throughout this trend she lives utterly as herself, a vulnerable woman; weak, yet in some ways strong, working out her own destiny in common with those she’s placed among. She’s learnt not to probe or try to force out reasons in advance — though later she can analyse as much as she likes. More important to her than anything — is to sift the substance reaching her, and not make mistakes; she has to be sure of ‘right time, right place, right person’. Other than that, as Kate, I don’t know at all.”

She gazed at me sadly. “I’m just a woman, Alex, just *me*. When people grasp that you have knowledge, they have terrible expectations of you. And if they think you fail them, their judgements are incredibly cruel, and their treatment of you positively barbaric — or so I’ve found. It would be so much easier if no-one knew, but sometimes foreknowledge is impossible to conceal, events conspire against it. Perhaps I’m not yet capable of such working, and my inability is used — or else it’s by design, I don’t always know. And despite the insights and blessings which make it all bearable, it has been so *hard* — so desperately hard . . . to live in the dark, having known what the light is. It seems to me sometimes that this planet is a vast distillery, fermenting crude and powerful emotions, and filtering them through a refining process which causes great suffering — yet the residual essence is in some way essential to that other Self that sends us down.”

“Gurdjieff said something similar,” I said gently. “Thankyou for trying

to explain — and I realise very well how difficult it is, and that you can't express it all at once. It's obvious to me, my dear love, that what should have been valued in you has been shamefully misdealt with by others — but if it's any comfort, I can assure you that my linkage with you is a great joy to me," I hugged her warmly, "and I regard your extraordinary faculty, and you too, as highly desirable!"

She clung to me, unsure whether to smile or cry as I saw by her quivering mouth; then she let go and said, "But we're all the same — don't you see that? I'm not an exception. The only difference between any of us lies in our degree of consciousness of what *is* — of Reality. *You too* are the same — already you've glimpsed your greater Self, and you'll move fast now as you probably realise. Why do you suppose we were brought together? Not just for a love relationship, however much this means to us. It's to help each other to waken from the dream of life — to extricate ourselves *consciously* from past conditioning . . . I can see things in you that need loosening, and you'll also see them in me, if you haven't done so already. Such obstructions keep us asleep — whether artificially or otherwise is beside the point; but we can help each other to undo them — and the love we share is the key . . ."

"What a heavenly thought!" I said, laughing, "it opens vistas that astonish the mind! But I *do* know, broadly speaking, what you mean, Kate, though it's difficult to visualise the type of experience needed, or how it could operate in our daily lives." I held both her hands in mine, and was about to say something further, when I became intensely aware of a potent stillness in the room, and saw that we had registered it simultaneously — a profound Silence that had no aural 'weight' or tangibility, and was acutely all-pervasive.

Immediately I was penetrated by the knowledge of the presence of the Teacher. That he was here *now*, beyond the range of sense, or subtle perception — in a manner at once abstract and indefinable, yet at the same time utterly Real.

What happened next was very strange. It was as if he removed a small and delicate shutter, or a square of veiling, from the top of my head. I regret I cannot more adequately describe this. It occurred in a dimension wherein form as we know it is non-existent; yet the experience of its actuality, complete with relevant sensations, filtered somehow into my mechanism of registration; like a happening in another mode of existence reflecting into this one.

For a few moments more we were motionless, until the condition passed completely. But the impression remained of a specific act accomplished, uniting us in a mysterious event that was inwardly comprehended, though outwardly unfathomed — at least by me.

We went out at last, and I took Kate to the hospital to briefly visit her mother, then shopping for bathroom fittings for the new house, and eventually to a restaurant for tea. She had been telling me about her mother, whom I hadn't seen, as we felt the introduction of someone unknown might further confuse her failing mind. I knew that Kate's parents had disowned and disinherited her through her mother's religious antagonism, and I now asked for more details of what had happened from the point at which her manuscript ceased.

The tearoom was busy, but we carried on an intimate conversation with surprising ease, and I learned of many facets of her life which truly appalled me. Her struggle without maintenance from Patrick, even for his children — or help from her parents, who turned their backs on her plight despite their own abundance. How she rented a largish house and fed and lodged seven students, plus working part-time in an office to keep afloat financially. Then how she damaged her back, and everything crashed.

It was to extricate herself that she went to Somerset — by an unusual sequence of events she was offered a cottage there at a very low rent. Entwined with these sparse details were other factors, too intricate to record here, and I glimpsed a further section of her life which was lonely and desolate, a nightmare battle to survive and care adequately for her children. This held a curious parallel, as I realised later, to the subtler trial she'd undergone before, as if the entire episode had projected into life — in a sense repeating as it worked right through into mundane expression.

I took her hand, an ache in my heart. The brief account was a gross understatement, as I knew too well, watching her sensitive face. I said softly, "You're full of surprises, Kate. When I begin to think I know all about you, I learn something else. I can't even start to assess what you've suffered. My poor, dear girl . . ."

She smiled with an odd touch of humour. "Sometimes I've thought that too, and wallowed in self-pity. But you've only to look round a little to see how hard a great many lives are, much harder than mine has been. I've had many compensations, and much of the work I've enjoyed. I can't pretend I didn't suffer — I did, to breaking point at times, yet at least I knew there was some purpose behind it — that it was placed in my life by the Teacher, and for some reason he wished me to experience it. He showed me it would be hard at the very beginning, and in a dream he told me not to be afraid — I must hold onto him in faith however dark and hopeless life became, and he would look after me. And he *did* look after me, Alex — through persecution, homelessness and despair. In the depths of the darkness he was with me always — though I couldn't see him, or feel his presence, I knew in my heart he was there. How many have that consolation? There are reasons for everything — the fact we can't see

them means nothing. In 1977 — during the state I told you of, I saw what many of them were, and felt ashamed that so often I had cried out in my soul against so much injustice, as I thought it then to be.”

“You don’t think so now, Kate?”

“I can’t any more, though my own human weakness creeps up on me often, especially when I’m tired and lonely, and the waiting goes on and on — but I’ve seen enough to know that whatever we think we do or suffer at the Teacher’s behest, is in reality *his* gift to us of opportunity, and it will reap its own reward in time. And whatever we try of ourselves to do for others, oh Alex! somewhere along the line it comes back to us, pressed down and running over.”

Moved though I was, I replied — “You don’t seem to have much recompense as yet, Kate — ”

“Oh no, not in worldly ways it’s true, but it’s pending! — and certainly I have everything I need — my sole regret has been my damp old house — and even that seems likely to be remedied!” She smiled at me rather shyly, and we gazed intently at each other with a wordless avowal of love. “Also,” she said, “there are more viable forms of recompense than material ones . . . we pay in advance for spiritual insight, but it’s the ‘pearl beyond price’ that no effort or pain in this world can *begin* to equate with. And as far as worldly things go — I have potentially the final guerdon.”

“How so?” I asked, feeling incredibly close to her.

“My dear . . .” she said. “I have you . . .”

This latter was said so quietly, so softly, and yet with such depth of feeling, that I knew she meant it from her heart, and an inarticulate response stirred powerfully within me, as if my very soul reached out through its fleshly bonds. Amid the clatter of teacups and continual buzz of conversation, we seemed quite alone — insulated even, from the busy Saturday life around us. We spoke then of our earlier ‘visitation’, and I described my own impressions (which were rather different to hers) and asked if she had experienced anything akin to this before. Perhaps I should emphasise it was completely unlike the sense of deific Presence we had both known previously in our lives.

“In relation to what happened to yourself?”

“Of course!”

“I *have* experienced it,” she said, “but a long time ago now — when I was with my former Teacher, and just before falling asleep one night. It preceded an intensive phase of inner development — as if a channel was deliberately opened to permit a free interplay of tuition and response.”

“That’s exactly how it felt, Kate. Interesting . . . what came after. Maybe this will happen to me. I hope so.” I dwelt on the thought, somewhat fearfully I admit, but my companion’s calm face and quite obvious

survival was reassuring. I emerged abruptly from my reverie.

"And has it occurred since? During the time you've been with Shah?"

"Yes, but not in quite the same way. It wasn't just the removal of a cover, though this happened first, in much the same manner as before — but it went a stage further. There was an insertion of a highly concentrated mass of impressioned substance directly to the brain, or rather, its subtle counterpart. Simultaneously I knew the content would manifest in the form of complex experience in my life . . . and then the aperture was re-closed. Almost like an ultra-delicate, non-physical surgical operation."

"And did it manifest?" My interest was intense.

"Yes. The insertion occurred in 1976, and seven months later, externalised as part of the cosmic experience I mentioned earlier. The most profound experience of my life."

A small group of youths now moved to a table adjacent to ours, and the volume of noise about us increased prodigiously, making further conversation out of the question. We left, and walked back to Kate's home, having parked the car there beforehand. It was damp and chilly, already dark, but the brisk movement was enjoyable and kept us warm. Crossing Midsummer Common, I remembered vividly our highland sojourn, and the time we had danced together, suggesting suddenly to Kate that I take her to a dinner-dance that evening. I surprised myself (to say nothing of my willing partner) as dancing just isn't my forte, and throughout my adult years I've stolidly avoided it. Later that evening we drove out to a country hotel, Edwardian in style and softly lit . . . and immediately entered an atmosphere that was entirely subjective, *yet mutual* — verging on the sublime.

We were strangely, exuberantly happy, as if we'd been given a special 'breathing-space' of grace — as indeed we had. The evening provided a foretaste of much subtler elements in ourselves, and each saw in the other an essence of being, at once dearly familiar, and yet unknown. Within this embryonic contact lay a latent fire, which, when I glimpsed it, set my senses reeling. It was too soon to attempt to evaluate my extraordinary state; but the effect was dual, and I felt we had touched on something relating to a role for the future. My spirits took wing as we danced together, seemingly fused in body, mind and emotions — and a heady inebriation not dependent at all upon wine.

It was harder for me than it had ever been to say goodnight at the foot of the stairs, Kate going to her room, and I mine. But I knew that our taste of rapture was measured, and brooked no liberties. As I got into bed it crossed my mind that this very embargo, tacitly fixed in both our consciousnesses, might well be the means we had used to release these unknown aspects of ourselves. Here was a ready-made demarcation line,

and neither one need decelerate into the mundane self with all its conditioning, at a time when perhaps an upward surge of spiritual momentum was vital to a finer process of development. It gave an entirely different slant to the Teacher's rulings, and caused me to wonder how many such were multi-faceted, designed for reasons quite outside our limited assumptions.

Eventually I slept, and awoke around three, knowing I'd dreamt of Shah, but the content slipped elusively from my mind even as I struggled into wakefulness. When the effort to remember was yielded up, I realised that my former condition had changed, and my personality-self held sway once more. The 'foretaste' was over.

An hour went by. My mind was alert and teeming with thoughts. Another half-hour, and I heard a sound in the room below me — a faint rustle of movement, and then a small click, like the switch of an electric fire. So Kate, too, was awake. I listened; there was a soft stir, as if she moved gently, trying not to make a noise.

More minutes passed, and rain began pelting against the window, drumming heavily on the pane in a steady downpour. I got out of bed, found my dressing gown, and went slowly down the staircase — each tread creaked slightly, and she must have heard. I tapped on her door; "Kate," I said quietly, "are you alright?"

"Of course," she replied. I opened the door and saw her seated at the small Victorian table on which stood the lamp — she appeared to be writing. "I woke suddenly," she said, "I've had a vivid dream that faded so quickly I thought I'd try to note bits down. I'm sorry if I disturbed you — I thought I was being so careful." She looked faintly apologetic. Her hair was ruffled, and she wore a housecoat of some pinkish stuff with ribbons. I registered at once that she, like myself, was in her everyday state again.

"What did you dream?" I enquired, observing her with pleasure. "And how about tea, Kate? I've been awake ages — no fault of yours! I'll make some if you like." She nodded assent, laughing about the tea, and I moved off to the kitchen. When I returned, she was still scribbling, and I placed myself in the rocking-chair on the other side of the fire. She stopped, and cast aside the pen, taking the proffered tea. "Tell me!" I commanded.

"It was incredibly beautiful," she murmured, "but try as I will I can't entirely catch it. We were in a huge tekkia — Shah was there — and people were spread out on the floor in three circles, one inside the other, their feet towards the centre. I entered through the outermost circle, then found myself in the middle one, almost aligned with Shah, who was part of the third circle, the core. The lights were dimmed, and several people, myself included, were given white microdots — one each — to be placed in the centre of the forehead. The dot was linked with something, or someone, of

a cosmic order — and we had to register the relevant vibrations if we could. I felt them acutely — and made certain sounds to indicate this. He leaned on his elbow and looked at me, saying something like “You are over-reacting,” quite sharply but impersonally. I knew suddenly the object of the exercise was to receive the transmission without manifesting any sign at all. The point was not in one’s ability to receive — but to control the effect.

“It got very dark then, and something unusual happened, which I can’t remember, but it was very important. He made three people into links in a human chain . . . he passed some substance to me, and I in turn passed it on to someone else, a man — perhaps it was you, Alex, but I have no memory of his identity at all . . . It was to do with transmission; but I can’t grasp it, and the rest is altogether lost.” She sat in silent thought.

“What a superb experience,” I said — “you’ve remembered a great deal; probably the rest was too subtle to hold onto, or perhaps he didn’t wish you to remember for some reason. Either way, you aren’t likely to reclaim it now.”

“I suppose not.” She sighed, and her face relaxed.

“I dreamt of him too, but lost it entirely. Odd, isn’t it, after what went before. I was certainly in the right state to register some of it, at least.” She turned towards me, giving me her full attention.

“It’s surprising you can’t recall anything at all, though it does sometimes happen. How did you feel when you woke — were you happy?”

I considered a bit, and was obliged to say no, for I vaguely recollected a kind of dismay . . . as if he’d shown me something bleak; and as I told her this, I perceived momentarily a barren place, which reminded me, in essence, of my night in the car outside the grounds of the Institute.

“I think my own particular ‘foretaste’ was a proffered staff,” I said uneasily, “maybe to help me through some coming difficulty . . .”

“Whatever it was,” she answered softly, “there was also a definite promise of good to come, so don’t be unhappy. It was a wonderful evening, wasn’t it? I shall think of you during the week, and try to relive it all in memory . . .”

“Oh, Kate — if only I needn’t go back!” I looked at her with a choked sense of longing as she sat remembering. Her eyes were shining and her face lightly flushed. On an impulse I got up and took her hands, raising her until she stood in front of me. “Do you realise how lovely you are when you’re all lit up like this?”

“It’s an illusion!” she said, laughing — “I’m not lovely at all. It’s the flattering light.”

“You are, you are . . .” I whispered, encircling her in my arms — “surely even those blind idiots who walked away from you must have told you so at some time.” To my surprise she stiffened slightly, pulling gently but firmly away from me.

"They did," she replied, "but I was younger then, and men always say these things anyway."

"What has age to do with it? Maturity has its own beauty, and if you think otherwise, Kate, you're an idiot too!"

"Look," she said, and held her face against the lamplight — "You look . . . You haven't seen me before without make-up — oh *please* don't laugh. You ought to take more notice."

I looked, amused by her insistence.

"I can't see much difference. You look the same to me as always — paler perhaps, and hardly any eyebrows! But what on earth are you worrying about? You can't stay eighteen forever, and heaven forbid, I wouldn't want you to. I think you're lovely as you are!"

"I've got little lines," she persisted — "and my skin isn't what it was . . . Nor is my figure."

I was about to make an expressive remark, when I realised she was serious. The lit-up expression had gone, and she appeared to have slipped into the anxious and vulnerable aspect of herself I had occasionally seen before.

"Is this what worries you?" I felt a deep astonishment at the awareness that it *did*.

"Of course it does."

A faint oscillation rose in my mind, engendering an accentuated sensitivity. I remembered vividly the dim hotel room, and also the evening I had found her crying huddled on her bed.

"Tell me," I said, "why you cried that night? You said you would tell me, but you never have."

At once she looked away from me, down to her slippered feet and the carpet. I repeated, with deliberation, "Tell me, Kate. There should be nothing between us."

The psychological wound was evident now. With heightened insight I saw it clearly — yet, conversely, there was nothing to see — the perception was sightless; beyond the range of clairvoyant vision.

Her hesitance was unmistakable. I shook her, very gently, my hands firmly holding her shoulders. "Come *on*" I said, "give."

Unwillingly she yielded. Her response was low and muffled, and I heard it unbelievably.

"You had a young and beautiful wife."

I sighed with exasperated concern. "Kate, what am I to do with you? We've had the evening of a lifetime, and you stand here grieving about your appearance as if I've never seen you before! There's nothing wrong with you! And I never think about Sophie, and certainly don't desire her, young and beautiful though she may be. I know now her basic psychology

— and it doesn't appeal at all. She's not in the least what I want — as you're fully aware!"

"Yes, I know all that, but it doesn't help — it doesn't alter the way I feel at this moment." She looked at me miserably, then away again, at the carpet.

There was some kind of blockage — a barrier, between one aspect of her psyche and the whole. I saw that she knew this herself, and was helpless to correct it.

"My dear love," I said slowly, "you're no different now to what you were several hours ago — and you had plenty of confidence *then*. What has made you so fearful? Is it because I came close to you, and you remembered how you used to feel in the past? Afraid to believe you were loved, because subconsciously you knew you would ultimately be rejected? It's purely associative, you know."

"But I was much younger then, and whatever else was rejected it wasn't my physical appearance — that was the only facet of me, in the last analysis, considered of value. It made it so much harder for them to go. Don't you see, Alex? I'm not as I used to be — the best of my looks have gone. It's as if I've been left with nothing to give . . . and to you, whom I love most deeply of all — I can't offer the attractiveness I once had . . ."

"And you really think I can't truly love you because you're not young any more?"

She nodded.

"Despite all that's been between us?"

She nodded again, and covered her face with her hands.

I watched her intently, aware of the imminent exposure of a psychological aberration, and suddenly, with perfect naturalness her mentation lay bare to my inner sight, and I perceived the delicate plexus of crystallised impressions that so distressed her, knowing instantaneously, in an area by-passing formulative thought, the means of alleviation. There are, regrettably, no words in our vocabulary with which to describe this.

I made her move her hands, and compelled her to look at me. "You dear, sweet idiot," I said warmly, "you don't know what you're saying. You know I adore you! We were made for each other, Kate. There is no doubt either in my mind, or yours, about *that*."

"Yes, but that's *it* . . . in a sense, you have no choice. You *have* to have me." Only her woeful expression prevented my outright laughter.

"I could say the same to you," I replied — "I'm no Adonis, and *you* have no choice either!"

She stared at me wonderingly. "But you're *beautiful* — " she exclaimed softly, "I've never known such an attractive man. The light you exude is radiant — I can see it always, behind your features . . . and I can't ever

imagine not loving you . . .”

“But that’s how *I* feel about you, too. And furthermore, my dear, perceptive Kate — you do me a grave injustice. You see *me* through the eyes of the spirit, just as you saw all those you have loved in the past, but you don’t credit me with the same ability in your own direction. The light in the soul is transformative — it makes everything beautiful to those who can perceive it — that at least I’ve learned! But others couldn’t see you in the same way — they were spiritually blind, and saw only your physical self, and whatever else they projected upon you . . . But I’m not *quite* as blind as they were — I can see *you* in just the same way you see me, with the eyes of the soul. I can *see*, Kate! *Don’t you realise what I’m saying?* You know very well my faculties are functioning, but the part of you that was damaged by ill-treatment — crippled, and left behind, hasn’t yet grasped the implications. *I can see you* — an illumined soul in a human form, with all the loveliness that you yourself can see in others, and in me. You’ve forgotten your own light, — that *you* have it too. And it gives to the form that houses it a magnetic quality *unaffected* by age . . . this is something you’ve never consciously taken into consideration. Your own personal blind spot. Don’t imagine I’ve watched you all these weeks quite fruitlessly!”

I knew by her dazed, still face that she had understood my meaning — that it penetrated the riven place in her psychology, and made it whole. I knew too, with unswerving certitude, that a benign and loving Intelligence had used my awakening perception, acting through it to release her from the residues of past pain, even as she had released me.

I held her closely, and kissed her tenderly and softly. Her housecoat was flimsy, and the thin nightdress beneath it brought her closer to me physically than we had been before — save for the night of my traumatic experience, which didn’t count. I could hear the rapid beating of my heart, like a wild tattoo, and again the swirling ecstasy soared through me, and an exultant singing in my veins like racing fire. Catching my breath, I let her go.

For a few moments we looked at each other. “I’d better leave,” I said quietly. “But I love you very, very deeply, Kate. I desire you beyond all reason. And I intend to make you my wife.” Then swiftly I turned away from her, and went back to bed, the strange, surging bliss breaking in waves within my heart.

The following day remains in my memory as a golden blur. We did not speak again of the events of that evening, but they bound us inseparably together. As I said goodbye in the cold night air before leaving, I was aware that the subtle barrier that so puzzled me, had gone — perhaps because I had acknowledged its purpose, and no longer had need of it as a

reminder. I knew we must wait, on all levels, before our lives could flower, and accepted it with good spirit.

During the ensuing week I heard from the Norwich agents that they had negotiated the sale of my flat. I had left them a key to use for prospective purchasers, and the speed of the sale quite surprised me, though doubtless the views and the well-stocked garden helped. The contract for the Cambridge house was due to be signed in a further week's time, so it looked as if these particular events would synchronise well. I had a weekend appointment in Exeter, and managed a few hours in Cambridge beforehand, on Friday evening, when Kate and I consolidated some previous decisions about my move, and made tentative arrangements for me to meet her children.

I had taken her out to dinner, and she wore a new dress, a smart purple thing I hadn't seen before, which suited her remarkably. Also a ridiculous and very feminine hat, that enhanced the looks she thought she had left behind her. I cursed about the weekend. Dave had presented me unexpectedly with a ready made time-table, and I nursed the uncharitable conviction he had manoeuvred it deliberately to avenge his outraged feelings. Much later that evening, as I walked through the dripping greenery fronting my flat, I felt suddenly glad this phase of my life was almost over; consigning its varied experiences mentally to oblivion, without the faintest tinge of regret.

A new site outlay was passed to me on Monday, through Bates, intended presumably to keep me occupied until my notice expired. It was miserable weather for it, with November fog and heavy drizzle, but thankfully it was in Norfolk and would not unduly disrupt my personal life. I felt rather tired and shivery, but worked on despite the rain, preferring the rural atmosphere, damp though it was, to the tension-charged offices; but I woke the following morning knowing I had a chill or 'flu, and sweating and fuming went out to make a call to Sachs before allowing myself to succumb to it.

It was a nuisance having no phone, but had been my choice when I first moved in, and until recently I had felt no need to alter this. Kate, too, was phoneless, as she said she couldn't at present afford the luxury, and preferred the upkeep of her small but voluminous correspondence. I had no intention anyway of letting her know I was ill, as she would be sure to appear with the determination to look after me, and I was reluctant to pass it on unnecessarily, if 'flu it was. We usually exchanged letters each week, and mine had gone early, filled with thoughts and an overflow of feeling. She responded immediately, and amid the miseries of alternating shivers and hot sweats, I delighted in her reply.

Dozing in bed, I observed with casual objectivity that I wasn't fretting

with frustration in my usual sick-room manner, feeling instead a somewhat guilty sense of relaxed enjoyment. My inner certitude that my future lay with Kate and was already marked out in some uncomprehended fashion, had uncovered a deep-seated fount of wellbeing, hitherto unknown; and I basked in it, immersing myself in semi-sleep, drifting a little below the level of consciousness while my temperature rose and fell. But on Thursday night, after dreaming quite blissfully of an event that lay well ahead in time (at once forgotten) — I saw again, with unnerving clarity, a desolate waste that opened out in front of me, and must first be traversed before my life could change.

Troubled, I thought all round it, but couldn't penetrate its significance — and gradually the impact faded, and I let it sink into forgetfulness. By Friday I was on the mend, and able to sort out my more pressing affairs and catch up on my reading; and I contemplated the coming weekend with pleasure.

Saturday found me fully recovered, and I journeyed to Cambridge with Kate in my mind, and a head full of plans for the future. The sun shone weakly and intermittently, but it shone, and the earth steamed gently with its recent excess of rain, lightly misting the ploughed fields as I passed.

Nearing the city I felt a tingling anticipation, and slid down the car window to savour the chill, fresh air, breathing deeply — my senses vividly alive to the stark beauty of the leafless scenery on either side. On arrival, I experienced a curious apprehension of the unexpected, and was aware of a faint vibration in my brain which registered an effect I couldn't translate. Having parked the car, I approached the familiar cream door to find a note taped to it, simply marked 'Alex', with the cryptic words 'Key in usual place' inside. She must be out shopping, I thought, but was rather surprised.

I found the spare key — which was always left, as twice Kate had managed to lock herself out, and on opening the door, felt strange without the welcome that had invariably awaited me in the past. On the small hall table was a letter addressed to myself, written Friday evening. She had received a telegram from her brother asking her to come at once, as her mother's condition was causing some anxiety. I knew she had visited her every few days, so this must be some new development. Kate suggested I stay if I wished, sleep there if it suited me, and make myself completely at home — she had left plenty of food, was desperately disappointed not to see me, and would be thinking of me as I knew . . .

I, too, felt very disappointed, and sad also for Kate, who would find the whole situation an ordeal. I occupied myself lighting a fire, and as soon as it was well established, made a half-hearted meal of coffee and sandwiches before visiting my intended purchase, where I embarked on a final

assessment of the alterations I had in mind.

The afternoon was spent in Heffer's bookshop, but without finding anything I wanted; then I sat down in Kate's sittingroom and drew up a few plans to submit to various authorities, and a list of fixtures and materials required; and having proceeded as far as at this stage was possible, discerned increasingly how incredibly empty the house was without her. I wondered disconsolately if she felt as lonely in it as I did now, and looked around at length for something to read, combing her bookshelves, not without interest, and settling for an old favourite to reperuse.

It was then that I noticed the red folder containing her manuscript, lying on the bottom shelf, part hidden by a box in which I knew she kept photographs. Gently I removed it. I would read it again, I thought, and brought it to the fire. But on briefly leafing the pages to first refresh my memory, I saw at once I had been mistaken — with an accompanying sensation of shock.

In all respects it was identical in appearance to the script she had sent me, though not quite so bulky as I now saw; but the substance was entirely different. Datewise, it continued where the other had left off, and appeared also to include a record of dreams and perceptions, culminating with a minutely detailed description of the experience that had affected her so profoundly.

Having perceived the content, I reluctantly put it down. It had been taken innocently, but I would never wittingly infringe her privacy, and much as I wished to read the script, felt I ought first to ask her consent. I put it back out of temptations way, and took instead my former choice.

Yet in the back of my mind the manuscript lingered, and when I eventually went to bed, I had the distinct impression I would dream of it.

And certainly I had a most peculiar dream. I was again in the library where I had found myself before, and once more climbed the steps, and sought the aged book with its present-day pages. Soon I found it, and turned immediately, with care, to the frontispiece — when my heart seemed to pause — for it was no longer Eurydice, but Kate, pictured there — with a thread in her hands, like Ariadne. She was descending the slope of a very dark cavern, her face astonishingly clear. As I stared at the book, the Teacher's voice came compellingly to me. He said, very bluntly, "Read it!"

I woke at once, and thought over the dream with a sense of incredulity. Had I created it myself from mere curiosity? But after reflection I dismissed this as absurd. It held the impact of an authenticity I couldn't deny. Nor had I known of the script's existence when first I dreamt of the book and its odd environs.

I tried to analyse my feelings, yet knew already my concern was not

with Joel or Sergei, or even with understanding Kate — it was her strange experience *itself* which affected me, and I remembered the faint vibration in my head, registered when I arrived, which had heralded increasingly some aspect of the Teacher's working. After a brief mental struggle I accepted this, and drifted into sleep again, waking later with the persisting awareness I should do as instructed.

Breakfast was frugal — I could not eat; and with a tremor inside me I relit the fire, and removed the folder from its place. By evening I had studied it from cover to cover, with frequent pauses in which I tried to assimilate the content. Its effect was subliminal and potent, evoking an undercurrent of understanding not registered by the rational mind. I was acutely aware of the terror and joy that Kate had experienced, and the immensity of its scale. She had undergone a gruelling initiation, both occult and spiritual in nature — a test of some kind . . . affective on every level, and in every particle of her being. Of this I was certain, and it raised so many questions in my mind I felt quite overwhelmed. They would have to be left for time and my inner consciousness to unravel, but within myself already was some deep echo — as if in imbibing with my eyes the written word, and projecting it imaginatively, I had activated and released a delicate mechanism in the very depths of my awareness. I knew my link with Kate was fundamental — that what she had passed through was already known to me, not in its essence, but as part of my inner knowledge of a greater Whole. This statement, placed in words, has little parallel to what was apprehended, but I cannot do better.

The script described the strange interlude in her life which climaxed a long period of intensive preparation, and was in itself, apparently, the prelude for something more. She tried to convey how, in an altered state of consciousness, she had registered certain insights concerning a major intervention in the affairs of humanity, and included the many preceding experiences that precognised this. She also described her overall perception of Time, and the process of her own evolution, and that of others, contained within it. It is impossible to give a coherent picture by the inclusion of excerpts — the original covers far too many pages. I will nevertheless record several fragments, without comment — save that the first few considerably predate the rest.

Before doing so, however, I am including some notes (edited, and in places partially paraphrased by myself) taken from the summation found in copy form at the end of the script. The original notes were contained in a letter to an eminent researcher, who expressed interest, but lacked the time to do anything further — but they provide a well-watered-down general outline of the folder's entire content.

' . . . instead of sending you a tape and sections of manuscript it might be less time-consuming and more to the point to outline briefly the structure of my experience, and to include separately a selection of excerpts to help clarify the points made. I appreciate your special concern is with possible proof of a reincarnatory process, and you may therefore find some of the notes of interest. They will at least indicate if I can be of further use to you or not. I think personally my only value as far as research purposes are concerned, lies in the range of experience undergone, and subsequent knowledge of the mechanism by which it was made possible. This yields a logical framework from which to make assumptions, and can be verified by the experience of others.'

'Throughout my adult life I have recorded dreams of a certain type (lucid, precognitive, or other-dimensional); and psychic and occult experiences etc. with a view to discerning their purpose, if any, and precognitive value, if any. Also their source, or origin. I commenced with a largely agnostic viewpoint, and undertook this study of personal phenomena because at times it alarmed me, and could not be slowed down or stopped. Whatever occurred was completely spontaneous, and commenced initially in childhood, progressing steadily in depth from the age of sixteen. My normal, routine daily life was not interfered with in any way.'

'As a result of my observations I concluded:

- (a) my experiences were precognitive and meaningful.*
- (b) their substance, in terms of external events, appeared designed to promote the expansion of conscious awareness both in myself and others intimately connected with me.*
- (c) an intelligence far superior to my own apparently guided and controlled my life, and to some degree the interlinked lives aforementioned.*
- (d) my personal life was following a sequential pattern as if in its entirety it was predestined. Its prime purpose appeared to be the development of what the Sufis call an organ of consciousness.*
- (e) this posited the likelihood of existent evolutionary possibilities for the individual at a certain stage of development.'*

'A factor which I felt to be of importance was that I was able to register subtle gradations of experience, which eventually enabled me to assess each insight independently, and pinpoint its type. Alongside common psychic perceptions — sensory sensings, clairvoyance and clairsaudience, there were much finer variations of the same order, experienced in different areas of the brain — increasingly impactive, and leading to other-dimensional states of altered consciousness which lasted sufficiently long to evaluate clearly. Some types of clairvoyance manifest in a swift succession of scenes, like a quickly run film, in the frontal area of the head immediately behind the brow. Another form is superimposed upon the eyes themselves, like a projected image from the brain, existent simultaneously with normal vision,

though lasting only a few moments. A third type, exceedingly vivid and more stable, is centralised in the brain itself, beneath the apex of the head, and in some manner, viewed interiorly. A fourth manifestation is of scenes projected outside the head, seen from every conceivable angle, as if the head were a thousand-faceted organ of perception. These images are clear, solid in appearance, stationary or moving, and visible for many moments. All the foregoing are communicative, and imbue the mundane consciousness with precognitive information, or data relating to a normally hidden dimension. There is also a non-visual form of perception, without attributes, giving insight to the root and purpose of human existence, and to a strata containing prototypes and formulae for the evolution of all species.'

'It is also possible to detach sufficiently from the limitations imposed by our non-usage, or inadequate usage, of large areas of the brain; and to rise in consciousness to a state beyond Time, where it can be perceived as a structure, already 'laid-out', with past, present and future co-existent. From this angle of perception, Time and Space are one; and space is simply the dimension of time.'

'... In the early years of this growing awareness, at the age of thirty-four I was brought into contact with a young man born in India, who had already created this organ of consciousness within himself. I registered the association precognitively beforehand, also its course and outcome, though I did not understand fully what I saw, nor the form his training of myself would take. ... There were no exercises or meditations — simply contact and conversations, but the effects were potent, producing vivid dreams in which he communicated instruction; and subtle changes in perception and comprehension. For myself ... the contact culminated in a spiritual ordeal akin to the annihilation of the ego.'

'After this came a decline in such experience, as if, having reached the zenith of my current potential, I had to return to the previous point of departure in order to stabilise normally; immersing myself in everyday living — full-time employment, the trauma of divorce, movement away from Cambridge for the first time in my life — to Somerset, Kent, London and Sussex for several years, then back to Cambridge once more.'

'... Following this period was a gradual reactivation of the psi faculty, and certain experiences unlike any touched on before were registered, affecting the spinal column and brain, and producing other-dimensional insights in which life on earth appeared in a new, most purposeful context. In March, 1977, these intermittent 'states' climaxed in a powerful cosmical experience, in full waking consciousness, which I registered clearly, remembered fully, and recorded as far as was possible. In part of this experience, my mundane awareness united with my higher Self, or spirit, and knew with its knowledge, and saw with its sight. It is impossible to communicate this adequately, but I perceived vast epochs of time, and the process, and purpose, of Creation. I existed in a timeless dimension, and simultaneously in this one. I was

aware of other, cosmical intelligences, far more evolved than my own. These Beings should not be confused with spacemen, or Supermen — they have evolved beyond all planetary form; and I was merely one pupil amongst many, all undergoing some manner of quickening and applied stimulus. Mankind is a cradle, or chrysalis, in which such potential exists as a possibility, or in an embryonic latency.'

'In this state I perceived a vast act of direct intervention in the life of mankind, like a realignment with the source of all manifestation, which necessitated the prior removal of an obstruction to its correct development. This occurrence coincided with the release of a fresh inflow of magnetic influences, also a stepping-up of vibratory pressure, like entering a more powerful force-field, or submission to a forced process of growth — designed to produce an evolutionary 'leap'. But it all happened in the dimension of the higher Self, and has not yet externalised into our world of linear time, though its foreshadowings are already apparent.'

'I saw that causality originates on this timeless level, from which commences the descent of each separate unit of life into time as we know it, past, present and future — which is nothing but now, a recurring point of awareness deliberately blinkered to engender a heightening of sensitivity. A creative process of continual refinement through diverse experience of feeling, of is-ness, or I-ness, like shaping a tool, or drawing out a fine thread of consciousness. There were other perceptions; all vivid, all clearly recalled, but the above will suffice as an indication.'

'... As I gradually emerged from this experience, I commenced to record in writing as much as I could grasp. ... My physical mechanism appeared to suffer the effects of shock, having less vitality than usual for a time; yet I knew that when I could assimilate properly what had happened to me — like a form of digestion — I would be able to bring it through to my personality self and utilize it in some way.'

'In January 1979 I retyped the record, and found to my surprise that I could now remember more of the experience than I had actually recorded — it had not faded, and was more real than any memory from life. I also re-examined all my earlier notes, and the events of my life, and now perceived that every vision, or ultra-lucid dream, or insight, formerly identified as springing from this strata of causality (prior to 1977), bore direct relationship to the March experience itself. In effect, that fragments of it, like split-off parts, were reflected sequentially throughout my life, precognitively and backwards — as if raying out from a central core; and everything perceived or experienced on this level since then, proceeds forwards in linear time. All my perceptions from this strata came to fruition in the experience of 1977, and those releasing themselves now into my consciousness stem from the same experience. I know them to be precognitive, for all past perceptions of a similar nature were precognitive, also I have already seen their source, containing the actuality of the perceptions, which, as before, are split-off parts of a whole. Yet the whole, itself, is like a seed — a compressed pinpoint of consciousness.'

'The events, therefore, that I shall experience throughout the latter part of my life,

are already existent. My only possibility of freewill lies in my reactions to these events, and the use I can make of the influences reaching me, (a) transformatively as increased conscious awareness, and (b) a possible usefulness to others. This alone creates the necessary ingredient for change; and ultimate progression thus lies entirely in the right effort of the individual.'

'... It would seem, from my present viewpoint, that the causal point is fixed, and my lifespan, metaphorically, has been a movement of focussed attention directed from one base angle of a triangle towards its furthest extension Δ , but at a predetermined intersecting juncture, an alignment with the causal Self became possible. The lesser consciousness united with the greater, and entered its dimension, which is beyond time. From this state both time and space are seen as one substance.'

'There were others who touched the causal level when I did, sharing the same experience as myself — but not necessarily registering it at the same time linearly in mundane life. Some who participated in the fullest sense, have not yet come to the awareness of this.'

Now follow the excerpts referred to earlier, taken from the original record.

'During the following year, when I was thirty-six, the intense anguish and desperate longing caused by the inner 'burning' in the heart region began to subside. There had already been fluctuations between this state and one of resignation and acceptance. In time the latter supervened. I knew I faced a 'coming down' — I was shown it in sleep and grasped that I must stabilise on a normal, worldly level, and reconnect myself with all things mundane. Gradually I lost the keen edge of my former awareness — and at first the loneliness and desolation was extreme, despite the fact that life plunged me again into circumstances and events involving others.'

'... I could not believe it, yet I seemed to be connected or 'plugged in' unknowingly to a group of souls who at some point had made adverse growth. This was frightening, especially as I saw later that some were incarnate, and already known to me... I could not bring myself to rationally accept these insights, if such they were. I was afraid of 'judging' or attempting to assess others. Another fear, a major one, was why? If I was indeed linked with such as I inwardly glimpsed — was I in like position, and burdened with karma of the most terrible kind? It all lay beneath the surface of consciousness, as if I had two lives, or consciousnesses, running parallel, but both saying quite different things.'

Note taken from 1967

'Body in light sleep; awareness of slight shift of focus — not an ordinary dream. I was on a beach; someone had been speaking to me about evolutionary development. I suddenly observed the sea quite close — the tide was static, and ranks of human figures arose from the sea and moved towards land, those in the forefront coming

onto the sand. I was horrified — their limbs were stumps, their skin dried and blackened; they had an air of hopelessness and despair. I grasped these were mutations, caused by some form of pollution, I assumed radio-active. I remember screaming, not able to bear the prospect of a future that held this. My unseen commentator said there was a way out for them. An eddy like a small, circular whirlwind rose from the sand — I perceived a spiral of time, like a bridge, rising from the juncture immediately prior to the catastrophe glimpsed. Those equipped to rise on it moved into a new dimension, a new epoch, in which opportunity and hope, combined with hard work, ensured correct progression. This 'bridge' constituted a screening process, whereby persons capable of development under certain conditions, and able to integrate the added impetus, were separated from the rest. The criterion had nothing to do with intellect or related ability — the quality of interior response determined it.'

September 1974

'Vision in sleep with powerful impact. It was very dark — I was 'looking down' on the earth and could see bright lights scattered here and there in the darkness. I stood with others, watching. The Teacher was with us, and conveyed that each light was a soul specially 'sown' into the earth's organic life to act as leaven, among other purposes. . . . He projected a series of visual scenes which streamed out into the darkness in front of me. These were of a subterranean network, a vast vice-ring, spread through the subtle sub-regions of the earth, which manifested outwardly in perversion, pornography, drugtaking, violence, and every kind of evil. The 'root' was situate in a specific area, which I saw pinpointed on the earth below, and from which centre or plexus spread the network, like a giant spider's web. This source was of an occult nature, and immensely powerful — it had a stranglehold on humanity, which could not develop correctly unless it was removed. The Teacher communicated that . . . certain implants had penetrated to the heart of the core itself, having infiltrated, like blood circulating veins, the very life-force of the subversion . . . that 'special equipment', pre-programmed to operate at an appointed time, would destroy the procreating subtle genus that perpetuated the world's depravities.'

August 1975

'Late in the evening came a powerful experience. I was aware of the Teacher's presence directly behind me. He removed various impediments from my aura . . . amongst them I saw H. disentangled and taken away, and knew at the same time that she had 'lost the power to wound'. I was shown that the last cycle of fourteen (?) years was being reversed, and all that had been sown in those years by everyone concerned, would now be reaped. Surface appearances in the past were unimportant, motivation was the sole signifier, and on this each soul was assessed. There was an immense sense of Presence . . . I saw many threads, like umbilical cords, leading from my solar plexus and linking me to persons whom I could not see. He tied each thread separately, then severed it, just as at a birth. A new road opened before me,

with a rainbow at its end — a pendulum was moving . . . my consciousness heightened to a marked degree. I knew everything in my life would change. This experience left me dazed for about an hour. It presaged some kind of 'death' and new life . . . I would either die or have a transformative experience.'

'Throughout 1976, I was aware intermittently that I approached a further experience, the nature of which I could not fathom — I knew it concerned many of the persons with whom I had linked over the years, and I glimpsed both suffering and joy — the former suffused with fear . . . With this upward 'pull' in my spiritual life, came a strange divergence, a 'descent'. I fear to term it a descent into 'hell', but certainly it appeared as a dark place in the subconscious — though this was not my own, but Universal. . . . I had in the past been subjected to occult attack a number of times, but on the periphery of my consciousness now loomed a more concerted threat which I was reluctant to define.'

March 1977

'For several nights, before succumbing to sleep, I registered information which translated itself into mundane terms, each time in the same manner. I was shown a large map pinpointing the positions of various agents, of which I was one — and briefed concerning a security operation which involved a drag-net closing in on a vice-ring. All agents were linked by intercom to each other, and to H.Q. Great stress was placed on the fact that infiltration of subversive media must be stopped before a specified juncture. The man in charge was known to me, and greatly respected. We were all given code names, and a special kind of humour and rapport existed between the agents which I registered, but could not remember factually when I surfaced.'

'N. was a necessary link, a channel. That evening, a triangular force-field was set up between the three of us. . . . I was gradually devitalised — and consciously aware that my energy was 'tapped' and drained from me.'

'I went to bed, too exhausted to experience terror — and immediately entered a semi-sleep state in which I perceived the outline of a huge, stationary shape beside the bedroom door. This remained throughout the night, but the intense fear experienced formerly did not recur, for I knew it was 'dead' — that it had been detonated, rendered inactive by an intelligence that had all things under control. I saw the 'shell' clearly and continuously — it was full of atoms of energy drained from various sources and magnetically supercharged, and these poured out like a volcanic flow all through the night. I did not sleep at all as far as I am aware, but remained in an in-between state, the outpouring suffusing me constantly. It was radioactive — my essence was saturated with these particles and I felt them stepping-up my own vibration, and forcing entry into the lifestream activating my brain. At one point I was conscious of being inside my brain — the network of chambers were luminous, glowing red and whitish grey — a place of cavities and undulating passages.' Then

the explosions began — particles blew-up every few seconds, like giant bombs, the reverberation was terrific. I knew I must endure it, there was no other recourse — each explosion opened-up a further chamber, and this magically impregnated substance, like ultra-fine rubber film, extruded into the ventricle, filled it, and overflowed into the next one, where more explosions occurred.'

'I saw a pyramid shatter and disgorge its contents; this set free many forces that had been occultly bound, at the same time uncovering immense resources only claimable by certain souls. . . . By morning the outpourings had slowed down, and the explosions were muted. I lay in a strange state, intensely perceptive and aware, my memory crystal clear. I knew an event of great seriousness and significance had occurred, but thought this was the end of its manifestation. I had absolutely no idea of the outworking in the two weeks immediately ahead, despite the foreshadowing marked in lucid dreams for months beforehand, but whatever I had absorbed began to externalise almost at once, at first in my inner awareness, but within hours, in my mundane life. It was like storing a quantity of high explosive.'

' . . . In the daytime, I began to feel the same impingement. . . . I saw an occult school, which recurred repeatedly through time, spreading itself like a giant spider's web, ensnaring the unwary, the gullible — the helpless and innocent, draining them of everything, at times of life itself. Yet more terrible were the uses they were put to — and their subsequent loss of potential and the possibilities of spiritual development. In one strange perception I observed myself caught in their net — but as a decoy, surrounded by an unseen but immensely powerful protection, and what was taken this time was charged in some way. The stolen life-force was itself impregnated, by prearranged design, to work a permanent undoing in the system that ingested it, and conversely, by the same token, to bring about its ultimate release from the chain of recurrence in which it was trapped, likewise its redemption.'

'I saw that many persons were 'at large' — individuals with misused magnetic influences stored in their karmic patterns, like walking batteries, leaking contamination throughout the earth.'

' . . . The tension in me was volcanic, and I did not know how to contain it. I could not keep still, the chemical composition of my body was keyed to breaking point, as if it were aware that it housed an alien force. At the moment of contact, when the subtle intake impinged on the gross awareness and began to activate it, there was the tangible impression of being hit by an actual force, like a thunderbolt, with stunning impetus. It sent me reeling with its velocity, and the pain of impact was intense, lasting some moments. I knew that the substances surging through me were highly occult, and charged in a peculiar way — as if they were natural compositions of a very fine order, but contaminated by wrongful use by their former hosts, and requiring cleansing and recycling before being utilised further.'

'I felt I had been blown up by a vast explosion, and in coming down again, could not reach my body sufficiently well to lock into it. At times I 'hovered' slightly above myself, in a dreamlike state, incredibly real and lucid, but not gross reality.

Perceptions were dual, everything synchronised, and meant something other than the obvious. Everything was interlinked — nothing stood in isolation. Events had a purposeful continuity. People were types, each belonging to a stream of moulding influences, and very few had any semblance of specific individuality.'

'Impressions crowded in on me — I felt them enter the area at the top of my head, and 'descend' into manifestation, causing me to re-enact roles from the past, though whether my own or not I do not know, as the substance absorbed contained the life-impressions of many personalities. One was of a Delphic Oracle; I experienced a duality of consciousness, being both my present day self, and another aspect superimposed. I perceived my normal surroundings, and at the same time sat astride a tripod over a fissure of rock, with gaseous vapours billowing towards me. I spoke in effortless and excellent verse in S.'s presence, concerning those witnessed in their repeating cycles; and what I prophesied was woeful . . .'

'Dimly, in the background, amid the effort to remain stable, was the awareness that this punishing voltage had a dual aspect — it could be harnessed, and re-used as 'fuel' for one's own development, and my consciousness intermittently expanded, bringing into perspective a greater cycle, which synchronised with the lesser, connecting it with the cosmos.'

'I became aware of two Beings who brought me great comfort. There was still the terror, the fear, rising and falling, but they kept me sane, and explained what was happening, though much remained beyond my grasp. . . . One I recognised as my present Teacher . . . At times my former Master was with me, but I cannot describe how — they were within me, yet outside me, and I heard their voices clearly — not clairaudiently, but as a telepathic transmission that communicated on all levels, including the verbal.'

'It seemed I was used as a kind of drain, or filter. Impressions poured through my body, like broken off portions of a larger mass. Some were in small blocs, relating to particular individuals, the nature of which were explained to me as they passed through my physical form — the human vehicle apparently serving as an intermediary earthing apparatus. I was told that this was the point of greatest danger — the blocs were still solid, composed of substantial wedges of 'red' impulses that must not in any way be activated — whose impetus would be uncontrollable if not adequately supervised — but that later the residue would disperse into small pockets, which would assimilate without too great discomfort, becoming more manageable as they split up. The greater bulk of the flow was sluiced away — I did not touch it; it was as if I had been on the periphery. That which I took came from specific persons, and there was a reason for this.'

'I saw that this process was going on all over the earth, like a cleansing fire, or giant security operation. Deviant impulses (or sanskaras), and every element productive of corruption, depravity, corrosion, destruction, disease and distortion, were cut out at the root, and ruthlessly 'burned'. It could be equated with a gardener determined to rid his garden of every parasite — a lopping off of dead wood and

fungoid growth. A planetary house-clearing, or a planetary abortion. I saw that the residue, too closely linked to humankind to be destroyed without damaging the innocent, would for a time continue to flourish, giving the erroneous impression that corruption had triumphed, as in the past — but it fed and grew only on the energy imprisoned within its own substance, like sap in a cut-off branch, and when this was used up, at the height of its power, it would rapidly collapse and disintegrate; for its roots were gone; its pipelines were severed; it could no longer vampirise and subvert the life force of humanity.'

'Now began an even stranger experience — one that I cannot hope to communicate, although in the main I remember it well. There was a process of activation which began just below the spine. At each point of intensity, a set of muscles were brought into movement, constituting an interior 'dance', linked with the cosmos and also the mechanism of the physical body. As each junction was reached, a sound, like a note of music, exuded from its source — also a perfume, subtle and pungent, and a harmony, absolutely distinctive, and a colour, glowing and luminescent. I remember an elephant near the commencement, threshing wildly at first, as if mad, then 'harmonised' and controlled. There was a four-petalled flower, brilliantly red, and an incredibly strong ox — but I may have mixed things in memory, as this part is blurred. A serpent was midway, swaying and hissing, but softly, as if singing — his perfume evoked a subtle ecstasy, like a rising incense. Then came a blue Krishna, lodged in the heart, dazzlingly beautiful, and the rest I cannot recall. During this period, which could not be 'switched off' — the Teacher talked to me reassuringly, advising me how best to stabilise, and speaking of future things, which gave me encouragement and respite. He said there would be a new Dynasty, a new dispensation — also a new 'Royal' family (on hierarchical levels) — that before long I would meet him "in London", and my life would move into completely fresh channels. He explained it would take five years to fully absorb what had been taken, and to correctly understand the implication of these events; and that the residual 'intake' would have to be literally 'sweated out' through the media of physical work.'

'... A little later, I was precipitated suddenly into another intense experience — a cosmic 'dance', linking this time with a sub-level beneath the spinal root, connecting with the elemental and mineral kingdoms. A further explosion, tremendous in effect, was like the application of dynamite to clear a pathway through rock. Each explosion had carried an enormous generative heat, and a fall-out which at first blanked the consciousness, and then clarified it to a hitherto unknown degree. It was as if each was the key to a strata of existence. In this instance, more clearly recalled than those formerly, the relevant 'kingdom' opened to me, and I was welcomed by, and communicated with, some of its inhabitants — the dark and beautiful Being in whose charge it was, and various elementals, objectified by my inner vision as fire spirits and others, in the forms of tiny men. The musical note of this level was very muted, and darkly infra-red.'

'There was a perception of the forward movement by one stage, of the inner

government of the world. Each functioning unit had passed to an increased authority, as the Overall Headship, equating with Christ, found fresh fields of service in a higher octave, and this position was immediately filled, and likewise all the functions in the chain of office . . . affecting every senior disciple and aspirant on the earth who held some form of working ability. Each link now had increased opportunity in a graded scale of authorisation.'

'Throughout the night I lived in different dimensions, moving from one into another without any volition. It was as if the entire scale so far experienced, now entered a further extension with parallel gradations, deeper and more real; almost as if what was lived through had already occurred, and my clouded brain could only now register it, in fragments, as it passed from a higher form of existence to myself in the flesh. There was the awareness, as each new wave of 'seeing' and 'experiencing' manifested, that these must be endured, to the best of my ability — there was no escape possible. This was so throughout all the days that it lasted. . . . The whole was an ordeal that had no respite day or night. In it I could not 'live' but at the same time could not die; it was an intermediary state from which I was powerless to free myself. . . .'

'And after anguish to the limit of my capacity — when I could bear no more, came the final splendour; the ecstatic tears, and the paeon of praise in an unknown tongue. Yet the words in essence produced their own translation, and in a strange duality of consciousness — my human voice singing the unknown, archaic syllables; my inner self conversant with their meaning and with what was happening to me, and my external personality trailing in partial oblivion behind — I yet grasped in my brain, simultaneously, the English rendition sentence for sentence. The transposition was immediate and pure. I remember now only a fragment — "And I know that I know; and I see that I see; and I know that I know" recurring in a pattern, whirling in a circular cascade of experience and perception, whose keynote was joy.'

'Now began an experience more beautiful than any registered in my life before . . . The cosmic Self . . . was received into a joyous reunion with her kindred . . . The Reality which was the core of all the deeper experiences was without form or tangibility, and beyond description — its transposition into words is but a simile, a faint reflection . . . She traversed Time, and retrieved in full her 'memory', and the bliss of self-knowledge overflowed like an endless fount . . .'

'I saw Great Britain set like a jewel in the sea — the Welsh mountains alight with sunshine, the vales and woods of Somerset, Dorset, Kent — an ancient forge, a 'wishing well', an ancestral home . . .'

'I saw a new inflow of evolving life-sparks superseding and overlapping the former stream, with adverse occult factors now eliminated, and all genetic strains left capable of strong, progressive spiritual growth. I witnessed the entire span of the incoming evolutionary wave . . . I saw Great Britain as a central nexus, from which source the whole world was 'fed' in a spiritual sense. There were twelve previous schools or orders returning to incarnation, which would eventually be situate in

various centres of natural energy in the British Isles. I believe there were a further two, not formerly incarnate, but cannot be sure of this. All these schools would commence their work in inconspicuous ways, their ultimate flowering assured in the course of time. Many were derived from educational systems of great antiquity, not known to the world of today. All had the same cosmic root, and would work co-operatively in harmony, but their external presentation of knowledge would differ according to the needs of the time and the candidates. I saw their past origins and the reflections of their influence which had survived through to the present day in some instances . . . There were ancient runes and rhymes; sung 'rounds' and madrigals — customs, folklore, and fairy-tales, still existent and organically alive, that had been used in the past for a hidden, spiritual tuition, and could in this day still be reclaimed, reshaped, and reused — ' . . . 'I perceived their re-enactment, and glimpsed ceremonies in simple settings, and schools of training, all joyously dedicated to the Master's work. There was knowledge and wisdom long lost to the world, yet still fresh and vital, enlocked in green woods and sweet hills, clear waters, running streams, stones and rocks — and in the distant past, or was it the future? — small communities, stone cottages, the scent of woodsmoke — a simple life surrounding a Teacher — one who taught from his level of being, in an everyday life of reflection, work, and rest.'

'In some manner I became fused with this great Being, and perceived myriads of souls released into life, and at the same time the cycle of recurring existence they had passed through . . . I saw a Great Cycle, a Span of Time containing within itself many small cycles. Each lesser cycle carried its own attribute, or 'lesson', which manifested as a trend of development, with all conceivable possibilities for its use or abuse. Freewill was an essential accompaniment at certain stages, as it charted a path which marked out the weakness and strength in each unit — it was not interfered with, though guidance was available the whole of the way. Inherent in the 'journey' of each soul, lay its correctives and means of growth, for the following cycle, or, more correctly, the second half of each cycle, produced a reactive principle, and turned back the souls actions upon itself, and that which it had sown freely was reaped without choice. The cycle now concluding was in actual fact a half-cycle, the first half, wherein freewill was manifest; though I saw it contained many suffering the counterswing of earlier cycles, producing a long train of accumulative effect grossly distorting the prevalent culture — the whole constituting a nadir point of weight and darkness in which egotism and cruelty flourished. The nadir also presented the end of a span of possibilities, for it synchronised exactly with the nadir of a Great Cycle, making it of special significance — a kind of full-stop virtually impossible to explain, for here the circle spiralled, and for those properly prepared, constituted the onset of an evolutionary leap onto a completely new time-track, and those who had not risen to their evolutionary opportunities, must commence again the eternal round, in effect a re-streaming.'

'Tears streamed down my face, there was piercing bliss, the pulsating joy of

longed-for reunion. Some kind of accolade, recognition of effort, and reward. It went on for a long time, with tears of bliss continuously. At some point, on a different vibration, was reference to the outworking in my earthly life — at best it could only be but a reflection, but I understood I would find it, bit by bit, in time.'

Lastly, I include the tailpiece, written in 1979, which is self-explanatory:

'It is January, 1979 as I write this, nearly two years after the March experience which created such an upheaval in my life. At the time I was told it would take 'five years' to assimilate and digest whatever was given me — and this I can well believe, for after two I can merely stand back and ask questions. I have attempted to interpret afresh, in the light of memory, all that occurred, but this is a formidable undertaking and I think I am only as yet approaching the possibility. The following is the furthest I can go at the moment, and may prove well wide of the mark, but I will include it as an endpiece to this record. If ever I write again on this subject, it must be on a clean sheet, in a new book — for here the old track ends . . . '

'This giant nexus was composed of elements from damaged and degenerate egos, all occultly contaminated, dangerous, destructive and self-willed, adhering together through the principle of mutual attraction. Those that had karmic links with such elements may in other areas of themselves have reached a level of development capable of great good, but, handicapped by contaminated impressions, forming, in many cases, impassable blocks, were subject to crystallisation and deterioration — the very opposite of what they sought.

'The destruction therefore was not of souls, but of accretions — accumulations of wrong growth detrimental to other aspects where correct development was possible. Conjoined with these were 'shells' drawn and attracted by the magnetic particles inherent in the accretions — the shells having already been sloughed off and discarded by the souls that 'wore' them. They became 'supercharged', full-fed by absorption of the potencies of others — these discarnate 'egos' continually renewing their existence in this manner, the whole constituting a formidable 'moon' wielding powerful tides of influence, and attracting youthful beings in their thousands to the perverted enchantment of witchcraft and magic, admixed with ambition, pride and sensuality — distorting beyond redemption the originating impulse belonging to a former phase of development.

'The potent and charged mentalities comprising the nexus, exuded thoughtforms and desires, received and ingested as 'food' by the masses. The rightful use of such developed potency is producing nutrition on mental and emotional levels, like archetypes, which filter the unformed subtle casings of human beings, assisting strong, natural, correctly oriented growth. So great and universal became the influence of the central core, of which there were many split-off parts, like a massing of cells, that wholesale 'shattering' (as with the recalcitrant human ego), was the last and only resort, the resulting dissolution discharged as effluent and earthed through specially

prepared channels all over the earth. It has a similitude or equation with a cancer operation — but in this case there can be no 'secondaries' — what remains are simply the tendencies, which court drastic measures as and when they emerge.

'The personality lives of individuals concerned will not have changed, but, stripped of their inner magnetic pulls and wayward leanings — the well-worn tracks of conditioned response — new possibilities arise. The karmic path of recompense and humiliation will ensure the eventual qualities of fortitude, endurance and compassion that are essential to all true progression, and those with sufficient capacity will build anew with courage.

'This act of intervention by a higher intelligence is, for our evolution, just a beginning — the demolition and clearing away of all not needed — the outdated, the dangerous, the ugly, the crude. The stepping-up of vibration, or quickening, or 'inflow of light' — however one may term it, heralds widespread changes, for this pruning and regermination, plus the spending-up of residual karma, is effective on all levels, and will lead to population changes, the collapse of societies, and a new impetus which all life must respond to. Herein lies a parting of the ways — the separation of the wheat and chaff. Those bearing the awakened 'seed' within them, will move along the time-track, and those in whom it still sleeps, continue again in the same round.'

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

After prolonged thought, I returned Kate's folder to its place, washed up, raked out the fire, and prepared to leave. It was damp and cold in the tiny kitchen, and droplets of condensation heavily beaded the unplastered walls. I remembered Kate saying she emulsioned them twice yearly, and still they mildewed, and was wholeheartedly glad I would soon be removing her to somewhere much dryer and warmer, for that I had firmly resolved.

Once back in my flat, I wrote her a long letter, telling her what I had done, and my reasons for so doing, also my perceptions and conclusions, and slipped out again to post it so that she should find it waiting on her return.

I sat over the fire well after my usual time for bed, and pondered long and deeply on what I had read, feeling the need to go over it all at leisure in careful study. My memory of many small details Kate had mentioned during odd conversations, plus my knowledge of her life to date, created the insistent awareness of an underlying pattern — of which my own life shared a part. I recalled a brief fragment wherein she had commented on the 'individual' nature of time with relation to one's personal experience of it, and I had taken two notes, which I now thoughtfully re-read:

(a) There were others who touched the causal level at the same 'time' as myself,

but not necessarily the same time linearly in mundane life. Some who were part of this experience have not yet come to the awareness of it, but will inevitably do so at the appropriate moment, just as some (as yet unknown to me), may have registered it before I did.

- (b) *The lesser consciousness united with the greater, and entered its dimension, which is beyond time. From this state, both time and space are seen as one substance.*

Monday dawned cold and cheerless, and I went to the offices still feeling the after-effects of my illness, plus a very late night; and a certain apathy I construed as the by-product of prolonged stimulation. Dave continued to avoid me, and the resident staff now danced attendance on Julie, and were little concerned with my affairs. I spent the morning at my desk, and visited the Norfolk site in the afternoon, suddenly aware that I was miserable and pronouncedly post-flu.

Tuesday brought a letter from Kate. Her mother had suffered a virus infection that threatened pneumonia, and was still very ill and continually asked for her — she felt therefore she must remain within easy reach at her brother's home for a day or two until things changed one way or another. After many years of estrangement and hostility, the old lady, having long realised she had been over-harsh and unjust, had now acknowledged it, and her grief and remorse for "what might have been" were piteous. Kate felt it important to put things right between them while there was time, but there *had* been an improvement, though slight, and if it continued, the hospital had indicated they wished to send her home, as nothing further could be done about the remaining slight paralysis save the slow process of treatment as an out-patient. As I read I knew quite well what was coming — this meant, of course, that Kate would temporarily have to stay with her until other arrangements could be made, the facilities at her own home being far less adequate for a semi-invalid. I felt dispirited. There was no guarantee that a week would suffice, and the days stretched bleakly ahead towards Christmas, and I could not see much light in them.

Again I came to a fullstop. I turned restlessly from my books, and could not settle to anything for long. I ought to be thinking of applying for interviews, but could raise no enthusiasm and let the days pass heedlessly; and as yet it was too early to proceed with arrangements for the house, or make preparations to leave the flat. The meeting with Kate's children was postponed, and there was no point of contact with Shah. I thought of the years Kate had waited, and even now had nothing concrete to hope for. It seemed stalemate all round, a complete anticlimax, and I was utterly wretched. The November weather did not help. Fog, my old enemy, enveloped the countryside in greyness, and chilled me to the bone.

Friday brought a further letter from Kate, full of tenderness and longing. Her mother's condition had improved considerably, and she was scheduled to return home on Saturday — Kate was at present transferring herself to make necessary preparations . . . I could visit if I wished, but she wasn't happy about it — she was strained and tired, and it might be better to wait till next week? I understood. Neither circumstance nor situation was conducive to the expression of what we felt for each other. I wrote a long letter instead.

Sunday found me snuffling, and I stayed indoors, huddled over the fire like an old man, and uncomfortably aware that I was retreading old ground — an overlap of last winter's experience before meeting Kate. How easily one forgets past miseries. I recalled the full flavour of my former hopelessness, and was amazed, yet sobered, by the sweeping changes in my life. It felt rather unreal to sit here again in despondence, and I tried hard to shake myself out of it, but without much success.

In the midst of my darkness I dreamed once more of the Teacher. It was very brief. I stood in a dim place that reminded me of the cabaret courtyard, and he suddenly appeared and tapped me sharply on the head. "Why don't you do as I ask you?" he said, and immediately I awoke. As I did so I remembered him saying, "Haven't you forgotten something?" and the two fused in my mind. But to what did he refer? What did he require of me? I racked my thoughts endlessly but had no idea.

Repeatedly I tried to read, to study and absorb, but my mind was no longer receptive. I had read the books so often, I felt I knew every word, and they had no more meaning for me. My whole being felt tired, and life was suddenly a static span, flat and empty — and still the weeks loomed greyly in front of me.

I turned within myself, alarmed at my own shallowness. My days were workfilled but lonely, and the most I could do at night was write tenderly to Kate, whose letters in reply were equally so. Fitfully I dreamed of debris and obstructions, which I laboured unremittingly to move away, and I knew that in the background of my dreams, Shah watched my seemingly futile efforts. My loneliness increased. I had the strange and persistent sensation that in some way I had displeased him, had not come up to standard — and was cast out into the darkness, away from the glowing hub of life where all that I loved belonged. At odd moments of the day I began to cry out to him, begging, imploring that he would hear me, and open his door to me. As the days dragged by, the cry became continuous, and day and night I thought of him, and what he wished of me, and tossed and turned in bed unable to sleep, unable to contemplate as before; unable to quieten myself, or even to pray.

Another week passed, and Kate's situation remained unchanged. Her

mother was rallying her feeble strength, and striving to re-orient herself, but needed her desperately and was unwilling yet to face other alternatives; so she stayed, writing me frequently, wearily, as sad as myself. I went that Saturday to see her, and penetrated the gloom of the cheerless house that held her like a prison. It brought us little joy. We clung together wordlessly — and then others came, family friends and relations — and soon, by mutual decision I left, for what we shared could not be furthered in the sad and stifling setting of an outworn situation.

How strange it was; my love for her intensified and became my substance, yet it made no demands. It was resigned, subservient, attuned to her needs, and the fact we must wait, though for what I no longer knew. My inner yearning focussed on the Teacher, and increased with frightening speed to an immensity — a vast and heatless burning that seized my heart and consumed it utterly, reducing me to nothingness. Each day was a long and wearisome endurance. I worked, and talked, and outwardly behaved in every sense as usual, but all the time my soul was in torment, and cried out soundlessly and perpetually that he should hear me, and assuage this piercing pain that had come upon me.

The following week rotated endlessly — through minutes, hours, days, and seemed eternity. The inner fire increased, creating such overwhelming longing, I was distraught, and could barely conceal my state from even the unperceptive eyes of colleagues. It was rooted in my heart, and had no linkage with human desire, though it raged like a conflagration towards an ultimate zenith of consummation, projecting itself as a total grief, a pining away, an *annihilation* . . . the moth consumed by the flame, a searing agony inextricably bound with bliss, a delectable wound that made one weak with its pain. I described it to Kate in my letters, and hers by return helped me bear it, conveying her with me into the nethermost dark of uncharted regions.

Just before Christmas, Dave sent me, via Bates, to Sussex — to see once more my past client of the nursing home. On my return, I did as I had done before, and found myself again by the village green, facing the white house where lived he on whom my thoughts dwelt. I sat in a kind of extremity, the sensation in my heart so acute, I felt I could not bear it for much longer and still live.

In my mind I walked through the gates, and approached the porticoed door. I leaned against it in an anguished daze, and knocked and knocked without ceasing — but no-one came. I cried out in my heart again and again to him — “*Please* let me in, Shah — I *beg* of you, let me in . . .” My soul spun out in timeless agony — a sweat of blood rose on my brow, and my whole being — in its dire necessity, poised in suspension in a single point, half-fainting into oblivion.

But I knew I would not put into practise my imagined approach. Even in the ultimate grief that came to me now, the totality of unrequited longing, the meridian mark of pain, I could not do it. My limbs would not move, and I was rendered powerless. He would not permit me to intrude before my time.

Momentarily, with swift and penetrating insight, I perceived at last what Kate had meant when she said, "It is not yet my time." To see beforetime those who beseeched him, as we beseeched him; to take us to him, and to let us in — would be to spoil his gift to us, that could only be given when all the factors were right. The appalling intensity eased, and my mind cleared suddenly. I *understood* the meaning of my suffering — that this strange, heatless burning was a cleansing fire that bored a way directly to him, that cleared a channel to a state wherein I could reach him, and *he could reach me*. And in that silent moment of comprehension — the transient pause between one phase, and another supervening, his voice breathed soundlessly into my mind — "Go back, and do as I asked."

I sat totally still, bewildered — not knowing to what he referred; and then my senses became intensely alert. Within minutes I had turned the car, and moved with careful speed along the wet tarmac. Without stopping I made straight for home.

It was late when I arrived, and very dark. The flat was cold and desolate, as if my life had gone from it already. A letter lay on the mat, from Kate, which I opened and read, not really absorbing the words. I refolded it with care, and placed it in my inside pocket. Mechanically I switched on the fire, and made tea and toast. My head was empty, as if a soft wind soughed through it, spiked with needles of fire. I could not think beyond the awareness that I had received a transmitted instruction, and that I did not know what it meant.

I slumped at my desk with my head in my hands, unable to eat. Should I write to Kate? What else could I do? I fumbled in the drawer and drew out paper and pen. What should I say to her? Should I tell her of my state? Or that Shah had spoken to me, and I did not understand?

I have done all this before, I thought — sat here at some similar moment, in utter despair. And then I remembered my dream, and the mild admonition, so currently apt — "Haven't you forgotten something?" A pressure rose in my mind, words tried to formulate, but I couldn't receive them. A gnawing hopelessness enveloped me, a sense of futility and conflict. It was all so dark, so cold, so *lonely*. My solitude turned in on itself — and for a moment I thought that time had stopped, and I was suspended in some ghastly abyss, not in the world, nor part of God, but totally, utterly alone.

My soul cried piercingly within me, with impassioned power, and then

my puny human self took up its heartfelt lament — “Please help me, Shah,” I whispered, “For the love of God, please help me.” My mind was blank, yet focussed somehow to a point, bound in an effort of will to do as he bade me — and gradually, as I reached out with the whole of my being towards him — the darkness thinned by degrees, and the loneliness thawed away.

Suddenly, I felt him there in the room, beside me — yet closer than this — a swift and blissful merging of identity. In a moment it passed, and then came a faint vibration, impersonal — entirely benign — and he touched my head, and a charge of light poured through me, and I registered and stored what seemed a virtual octave of experience, which I knew would work its way into my consciousness with time. And just as suddenly, he had gone.

I looked at the sheet of paper before me. I must tell Kate, I thought, and poised the pen. But my mind was a vacuous maze, devoid of the necessary words. I sat with the pen in my hand, and heard, all at once, the mundane sounds of temporal existence around me — the tick of the clock, the rustle of fallen leaves outside in the wind — the creak of the chair as I moved imperceptibly to ease my tired muscles — as if I’d relocked unknowingly into my daily self, like a coin in a slot.

And suddenly I *knew* — I understood what he wished of me. I felt a stream had been released inside me, trickling a little, but soon flowing freely — and then I began to write: ‘It was nearly dark when I reached London — the chilly, blustery darkness of an early April evening. I was shivering . . .’

Cambridge.
June 1980



ISBN 0 946402 00 0

A sheltered Edwardian-style upbringing preceded the author's abrupt precipitation into the little-known world of Sufi Teaching Methods.

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